HARLEQUIN®

DATING THE MILLIONAIRE DOCTOR

Marion Lennox

MEDICAL™

âNo,â she whispered. âI donât want to wake up beside you.â

Something shuttered in his faceâan expression she didnât like. Pain? No. It was a closing of something that had just barely started to open.

âJake, no,â she said swiftly. Tori did not want to hurt this man, but this was important. She was struggling to explain it, struggling to understand it herself, but somehow she had to find words for what she was feeling. âWhat happened tonight was magic, time out of frame. I needed it so muchâI needed youâand Iâll be grateful for the rest of my life. But if I wake up beside you in the morningâ¦then I might hold and cling. I donât want that. I donât want anything to mess with what we had tonight.â

I donât want to fall in love.

Where had that come from? No matter, it was there, hovering between them as if both had thought it.

Loveâ¦ After one night? She didnât think so.

She knew she had to move on. Somehow Jake seemed to have given her the strength to do just that, and she would not mess with it.

âI loved tonight,â she whispered. âTonight I loved you. But we both know our worlds donât fit together. Letâs just accept tonightâs magic and move on.â

âIâm not sure I can,â he said as he pushed open the door to her bedroom with his foot.â¦

Dear Reader,

On February 7, 2009, wildfire destroyed a vast section of Australiaâs southeast corner. Almost two hundred lives were lost, many people lost their homes and vast tracts of farmland and natural bushland were destroyed. But in the days that followed we saw our community at its best.

I was privileged to be part of a livestock appeal, and the response left us overwhelmed by human kindness. People brought in birdseed and cuttlefish, and others staggered in under huge bags of dog food. We had people who looked as if they had no money at all coming in with animal bedding, foodâanything they could think of. We had companies donating truckloads of their produce. We had vets arriving with veterinary equipment.

Volunteers loaded, unloaded, distributed. Out in the burned-out bushland volunteers scattered feed, searched for injured animals, did whatever was needed. Volunteers are working still.

In Toriâs story I wanted to share with you some of my pride in my community, and my awe at what people are capable of. From the ashes springs new life.

Take care of each other, but know that in times of deepest trouble weâre never truly alone.

And we can still look forward to love.

Marion Lennox

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DATING THE MILLIONAIRE DOCTOR

This book is dedicated to all the wonderful volunteers who worked tirelessly to save injured wildlife after the Australian Black Saturday bushfires.

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CHAPTER ONE

Five-minute dating was five minutes too long. Heâd dated nine women tonight, and the last was the least inspiring of the lot.

Jake glanced down at his fact sheet, hoping for help. *Victoria. Twenty-nine. Single.* There wasnât a lot here to talk about.

âIâm pleased to meet you, Victoria,â he ventured. Thatâs terrific, he thought wryly. Snappy dialogue. Incisive. Excellent way to start things rolling.

âMy friends call me Tori,â she ventured, dragging her gaze from the door. Was she thinking about escaping?

âIs this your first try at speed dating?â

âYes. And you?â

âYes.â

This wasnât exactly scintillating, he conceded. Where did he go from here?

Each of his last nine âdatesâ had been vivacious and chirpy. He hadnât needed to make an effort. Now, when effort was required, he wondered whether it was worth it.

Had Tori made an effort?

Victoriaâor Toriâlooked a real country mouse. She was wearing a knee-length black skirt, scuffed court shoes and a white blouse with ruffles down the front. Her chestnut-brown curlsâhad she cut the fringe herself?âhad been pulled into a rough knot, simply tied with a white ribbon. She wore no make up and no jewellery.

Why was she here if she wasnât prepared to spend some time on her appearance? he wondered. The lines around her clear green eyes were stretched tight, making her seem a lot older than twenty-nine years. But did she care? She looked as if she wanted to be here even less than he did, which was really saying something.

The manager of Dr. Jake Hunterâs Australian properties had promised Jake heâd enjoy it, but enjoy was so far off the mark Jake couldnât believe it. But he was here. He was stuck. He had

to make conversation.

âSo what do you do for a living?â

âI care for injured wildlife.â

Thatâd be right. She looked like a do-gooder. Not that he had anything against do-gooders, he reminded himself hastily. It was just that she lookedâ¦the type.

âSo youâll have been busy in the fires?â

âYes.â

And here was another conversation stopper. Six months ago wildfire had ripped this little community apart, decimating the entire district. As an outsider Jake didnât know where to take it. Should he say something like, Was your house burned? Was anyone you cared about hurt?

Surely the fact that sheâd come to speed dating was proof that it hadnât touched her too badly. But donât go there, he told himself, and he didnât. Which left silence.

âWhatâ¦what about you?â she asked, sounding desperate, and he thought, Three minutes and fifty seconds left.

âI live in the U.S. but I own properties here, in the valley and up on the ridge. Iâve come back now to check on them, maybe put them on the market.â

âWere they damaged?â

âNot badly. My managerâs been taking care of them for me. Heâs the one who talked me into coming tonight.â

âSo speed datingâs not your thing?â

âNo,â he admitted, and decided to be honest. She looked the sort of woman who called a spade a spade. âRob said you were a guy short. I got dragged into this at the last minute.â

âYou donât want to be here?â

âNo.â

âThen Iâm wasting your time,â she said, and suddenly the mouse had changed into something else entirely. Her relief was palpable. She rose and took his hand in a grip so firm it surprised him. âThis is the last round so we can finish this now. Goodnight, Jake.â

Then, astonishingly, she smiled, a wide, white smile that had the power to turn her face from plain to something extraordinary. But he didnât have a chance to register the smile for long. Sheâd released his hand and was heading for the door,

her sensible heels clicking briskly on the polished wooden floorboards of the Combadeen Hall.

And to his further bewilderment, the moment she rose she lookedâ¦cute? Definitely cute, he thought. Her curls bounced on her shoulders. She had curves in all the right places, the badly fitting skirt unable to conceal her tiny waist, the lovely lines of her legs and the unconscious wiggle of her hips as she stalked to the door.

He wasnât the only one watching. As she tugged the door open and walked out into the night, as the door slammed closed behind her, he realised everyone else in the hall was looking as well, as astonished as he was.

Heâd just been stood up for a speed date. Heâd been stood up by a smile that was truly stunning.

Should he follow?

Um, no. She was right. Speed dating was not his thing.

Nor was any other sort of dating, he acknowledged. He was in town to check on his fatherâs property, to sign documents to put the farmhouse on the ridge on the market and to make a decision about the resort. Then he was out of here. His job back in the States was waiting. He had no place here.

So why was he watching a country mouse stalk away from him, as if he cared?

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Why had she come?

Her best friend, Barb, had lied to her. They canât have been a woman short if that guyâJake?âcould patronise her by saying he was only here to make up numbers, to do them all a favour.

Arrogant toerag.

Outside, the stars were hanging low in the sky. The air was crisp and clean, and she filled her lungs, as if the hall inside had been full of smoke.

Of course it wasnât, though maybe the smell of smoke would never completely leave her. The fire that had ripped through these mountains had changed her lifeâand she wasnât ready to move on, no matter what Barb said.

âPlease come tonight,â Barb had pleaded. âWeâre desperate to make up the numbers. Itâll be fun. Come on, Tori, life can be good again. You can try.â

So sheâd tried. Not very hard, she conceded, looking ruefully down at her serviceable skirt. Sheâd been living courtesy of welfare bins for too long now.

Toriâor more formally Dr. Victoria Nicholls, veterinary surgeonâhad no financial need of welfare bins, but the outpouring of the Australian public had been massive. The local hall was filled with clothes donated to replace what was burned, and it was easier to grab what she needed than to waste time shopping.

She hadnât shopped sinceâ¦

She shook herself. Donât go there.

But maybe she had to go there. Maybe that was part of the healing. No, she hadnât shopped since the fire. She hadnât dated since the fireâor before, of course, but then sheâd had Toby. Or sheâd thought sheâd had Toby. There was the king of all toerags. Even the thought of him made her cringe. That she could have imagined herself in love with himâ¦

Sheâd been incredibly, appallingly dumb. Sheâd made one disastrous mistake that had cost her everything, so what on earth was she doing lining up for another?

Oh, for heavenâs sake, she was supposed to be moving on. There were good people out there, she told herself. Good men. She had to learn to trust again. Jake had seemedâ¦

Bored. Compelled to be there. But sort of interesting?

Maybe Barb was right; she did need to get out more, because Jake seemed to have stirred something in her that hadnât been stirred for a long time.

Heâd been long and lean and sort ofâ¦sculpted. Rangy. He hadnât bothered to shave, and there was another mark against him. Sheâd gone to all the trouble of finding this stupid blouse and heâd come with a five-oâclock shadow. Mind, it had looked incredibly sexy, with his deep, black hairâa little bit wavyâand his lovely brown eyes and the crinkles around his tanned face that said he normally didnât look as bored as this; normally he smiled.

How stupid was this? She gave herself an angry shake. Sheâd met ten men tonight, all of them seemed uninterested and uninteresting, and even though Jake seemedâ¦interestingâ¦he was the rudest of the lot.

Sheâd been stupid once. Any relationship she might have in the future must thus be dictated by sense and not by hormones, and all sheâd felt with Jake was hormones. Lots of hormones.

Disgusted, she climbed into her battered van and headed out of the car park, back up the mountain. Sheâd been away for long enough.

No matter what Barb said, she wasnât ready for a new life. She already had an all-consuming one.

Or did she? Barb was right, she accepted. The life she knew was coming to an end.

Where did she go from here?

Whereverâas long as her decisions were based on sense and not hormones, she told herself fiercely and headed back up the mountain.

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âAnyone strike your fancy?â

Jakeâs manager and friend from university days was watching a blonde totter across the car park to her cute little sports car. She was definitely Robâs choice for the night. Maybe heâd even take it further.

As opposed to Jake. He had no intention of ever taking things further. Yeah, it had been crazy to agree to speed dating. He was here for less than a week, and every one of the women heâd met tonight had diamonds in their eyes.

He didnât do diamonds. Diamonds had been drilled out of him early.

Jake had been brought up by a mother who spent her life bewailing an Australian father who was, according to her, the lowest form of life on the planet. Love made you cry, his mother told him, over and over from the time he was a toddler, since sheâd taken him back to the States andâas sheâd said repeatedlyâabandoned her dreams for ever.

Maybe his motherâs broken dreams had left their legacy. Who knew? He needed a shrink to tell him, but a shrink couldnât change him. He didnât do long-term relationships. Heâd never felt the slightest need to take things down that road. Women were colleagues and friends. They were often great companions. The occasional mutually casual relationship was great, but why

open yourself to the angst of commitment?

Rob, however, had talked about tonight as though it was the answer to his prayers. As if diamonds were on his agenda. Which was ridiculous.

âWhat do you see in this five-minute set-up?â he demanded, and Rob gave a crooked smile.

âMy perfect womanâs out there somewhere. I just have to find her. So there was no one tonight who struck your fancy?â

âYour ladyâs hot,â Jake conceded, being generous. âBut no.â

âSo what did you say to Doc Nicholls?â Rob asked. âTo make her walk out.â

âDoc Nicholls?â

âTori. Barb says sheâs the vet up on the ridge, part of the group that rent your house. Iâm thinking I should have met her before this, but since the fires lifeâs been crazy. Any negotiationâs been done through Barb. Then tonightâ¦I couldnât make her talk, but at least she stayed the full five minutes. Unlike you. You didnât say anything to upset her, did you? Barbâll have me hung, drawn and quartered if youâve hurt her feelings.â

âHow could I have hurt her feelings?â

âYou say it like it is,â Rob said. âNot always best.â

âI donât tell lies, if thatâs what you mean.â

âSo what did you tell her?â

âJust that I was here to make up the numbers.â

âRight,â Rob said. âThatâd be a turn-on. Iâm speed dating because Iâm being kind. Woo-hoo.â

âLook, it doesnât matter anyway,â Jake said, shoving his hands into his pockets and staring out at the vast night sky. Hankering for Manhattan where stars were in shop windows and not straight up. âIâll get the house on the market and leave again, though I donât know why you canât do it for me.â

âI offered, if you remember, and for once you decided to take an interest and come do it yourself.â

âThe figure seemed ludicrously low.â

âWho wants a house on top of a fire-prone ridge?â

âIt was snapped up pretty fast after the fires.â

âOnly because there was still green feed around it,â Rob said

bluntly. âAnd you offered it rent free. But six months on, thereâs feed everywhere, and itâs smoke damaged. Property values on the ridge will rise again but not until the memory of the fire fades a bit. So many of the people round here lost someone. Youâre lucky you werenât living here yourself.â

Yeah, wellâ¦ Luck had all sorts of guises, Jake thought, as they headed back down the valley towards the second property his father had left himâa lodge with attached vineyard. His mother would definitely say he was lucky not to live here. His mother would be devastated that he was here now.

But how could he help but come? Jake was wealthy before his father died, but his fatherâs death had made him more so. The combined properties, even at post-fire prices, were worth a fortune.

Why had he held onto them? That was a question he was having trouble facing, and maybe thatâs why he was hereâseeking some final connection to his father.

Apart from financial supportâgiven grudgingly, according to his motherâJakeâs father had played no part in his life. He hadnât contacted him all through his childhood. Thereâd been nothing. But twelve years ago, when Jake qualified as a doctor, heâd finally received a letter. Congratulating him and wishing him all the best for his future. Intrigued, heâd written back. Thatâs when heâd discovered his father was working as a country doctor in the hills outside Melbourne.

Heâd decided he wouldnât mind getting a personal idea about this man whoâd cared for him financially but in no other sense. Tentatively heâd suggested a visit.

But, âI hear your motherâs ill and sheâd hate it,â his father had said bluntly. âIâve married again. Weâve all moved on. After all these years, whatâs the point? Iâm glad youâve graduated and Iâm proud of you. Iâm sorry I havenât been able to contact you before, but now I haveâ¦letâs leave it there.â

So heâd left it, and then life grew busy. Heâd immersed himself in his career. Heâd visit Australia one day, he promised himself, but then five years ago his father died, suddenly, of a massive coronary.

Jake had finally come then, to a funeral that shocked him with the community outpouring of grief. Heâd sat at the back of the church and watched strangers cry for a father he didnât

know. A father who hadnât even objected when his mother had changed his name back to hers. Who seemed to have little connection to him at all.

But when tentatively heâd confessed to the elderly lady beside him who he was, to his astonishment sheâd known all about him.

âIâm one of Old Docâs patientsâand you must be Jake,â sheâd said, sniffing and beaming a watery smile at him. âHis American son. Doc had a baby picture of you up on his clinic wall. I used to say to him it was a shame your mother took you away, but heâd say, âJust because heâs in the States doesnât make him any less my son. I love him wherever he is.ââ

Heâd loved him? That was the first heâd heard of it. The woman had wanted to introduce him around, but he was so shocked heâd simply walked away.

Maybe he should have sold the properties then, but it had seemed wrong. Troubled by the conflicting messages he was gettingâhad his father indeed cared?âand by the morality of accepting such an inheritance, heâd employed Rob to manage the properties and heâd retreated to the States. To his all-consuming career as chief anaesthetist at Manhattan Central.

But now, finally, heâd returned.

The lodge, once owned by his stepmother and run as a winery and genteel place of retreat, had been needed as emergency accommodation in the first weeks after the fire. Rob had it running again now, but there were few guests.

Rob had worked in hospitality for years. Five years back heâd followed a lady to Australiaâof courseâand jumped at the opportunity to run the lodge, but getting it viable again could take more than Robâs enthusiasm. And up on the ridge, Jakeâs second propertyâthe one used by Tori and her friendsâwas smoke damaged and had been used for six months as an animal hospital.

So maybe he should sell both. Maybe he should abandon any last trace of a father he didnât know, abandon any last connection. Rob would find alternative employment. His friend was born hopeful. The blondeâs car was in front of them, and Rob was speeding up and slowing down, doing a bit of automotive courting. Jake shook his head in disbelief.

âHey, stop it with the disapproval.â Rob grinned, sensing his

thoughts. âWorry about your own love life.â

âI donât have a love life.â

âExactly. My lifeâs work, wine and women. Your lifeâs medicine, medicine and medicineâand worry. You know you donât need to. The resort will turn around.â

âMaybe it will,â Jake agreed and then thought, Why *was* he worrying? The winery supported the lodge, he had no money problems, so why was he even here? And the farmhouse up on the ridgeâOld Docâs Place, the locals called itâwell, why was he quibbling about price? âIâll go check out the ridge tomorrow, put it on the market and then go home.â

âBack to your medicine.â

âItâs what I do.â

âItâs what you are,â Rob said. âWhy do you think I conned you into coming tonight? You need a life.â

âI have a life.â

âRight,â Rob drawled in a voice that said he didnât believe it at all. âSure thing.â

CHAPTER TWO

She was losing the fightâand someone was banging on the front door. Her nurseâs gaze shifted towards the entrance, her brows raised in enquiry.

âLeave it,â Tori said tightly. âSheâs slipping.â

Up until now the koala under her hands had been responding well. Like so many animals, sheâd been caught up in the wildfire, but she was one of the lucky ones, found by firefighters the day after the fire, brought into Toriâs care and gradually rehabilitated.

Tori had worked hard with her, and up until now sheâd thought sheâd survive. But then a few days ago sheâd found a tiny abscess in the scar tissue on her leg. Despite antibiotics and the best of care, it was spreading. It needed careful debridement under anaesthetic. That left a problem. With this shelter winding down, she no longer had full veterinary support.

If she took her down the mountain she could get another veterinarian to assist, but travel often took more of a toll on injured animals than the procedure itself. Thus she was working with Becky, a competent veterinary nurse who worked under instruction. It wasnât enough. She needed an expert, right here, right now, who could respond to minute-by-minute changes in the koalaâs condition.

She was working as fast as she could to get the edges of the abscess clean but she couldnât work fast enough. The little animal was slipping. To lose her after all this timeâ¦ She was starting to feel sick.

âAnyone there?â It was a deep masculine voice, calling from the hallway. Whoever had knocked had come right in.

The door to their improvised operating theatre opened. Tori glanced up, ready to yell at whoever it was to get outâand it was Jake. Her one-and-a-half-minute date.

Whatever. It could be the king himself and there was only

one reaction. âOut,â she snapped, and Becky said, âI think sheâs stopped breathing.â

Her attention switched back to her koala. She could have wept. To lose her nowâ¦

âCan I help?â Jake demanded.

She shook her head, hardly conscious that she was responding. She had to intubate. But if she left the woundâ¦ She couldnât do both jobs herself.

âUnless you can intubateâ¦â she whispered, hopeless. She shouldnât have tried. The oral conformation of koalasâsmall mouth, narrow dental arcade, a long, soft palate and a caudally placed glottal opening, all of these combined with a propensity to low blood oxygen saturationâmade koala anaesthetics risky at the best of times. And without another vetâ¦

âI can intubate,â he snapped. âKeep working.â

âYou can?â

Jake was already at the side bench, staring down at equipment. âWhat size tube?â

âFour millimetre,â she said automatically.

Another vet? Maybe he was, she thought, as he grabbed equipment and headed to the table. Whoever he was, he knew what he was doing.

The soft palate of the koalas obscures the epiglottis from direct view, but Jake didnât hesitate. Heâd found and was using silicone spray, snapping instructions at Becky to hand him equipment.

Tori was concentrating on applying pressure to the wound to prevent more blood loss. She was therefore able to watch in awed amazement as Jake manoeuvered the little animal into a sternal recumbency position, as he applied more sprayâand as he slid the tube home.

It was like the Angel Gabriel had suddenly appeared from the heavens. Ask and ye shall receive. Sheâd barely been aware that sheâd prayed.

No matter where heâd come from, no matter that she couldnât see his wings and he sounded autocratic and fierce rather than soft and halo-like, her one-and-a-half-minute date was definitely assuming angel-like status. He had oxygen flowing in what seemed seconds. The monitor by Toriâs side showed a slight shift in the thin blue lineâand then a major one.

She had life.

âHeart rateâs seventy beats a minute,â Jake snapped, adjusting the flow. âHow does that compare to normal?â

Not a vet, then? Or not a vet who cared for koalas. Of course not.

âLow, but a whole lot better than before you arrived,â she told him, but there was no time for questions. Stunned, she went back to what she was doing. She was incredibly grateful but now wasnât the time to show it. She had to get this wound debrided, then get it dressed so the anaesthetic could be reversed.

Koalas died under anaesthetic. This one wouldnât. Pleaseâ¦

As if in echo of her thoughts, Jake said, âShe seems knocked around. Wouldnât euthanasia be the kindest option?â Heâd had time now to take in the scar tissue, the signs of major trauma.

âSays the man who just saved her,â Tori muttered. âLetâs try to keep her alive until I finish. We can do the moral debate later.â

âRight.â

There was silence while she worked on. Becky had faded into the background, assisting both of them, deeply relieved, Tori guessed, to be freed from a task she hated. There was so much theyâd done in the past six months theyâd all hatedâincluding putting down more animals than she wanted to think about.

How to explain that after so much death, one life became disproportionately important. This little one she was working on didnât have a name. Orâ¦she shouldnât give her one. She should not be emotionally involved.

Only, of course, she *was* emotionally involved. Koala Number Thirty-sevenâthe thirty-seventh koala sheâd treated since the fireâbelonged in the wild, and Tori was determined to get her back there. She would win this last battle. She must.

Thanks to this man, she just might.

Who was he?

She was finishing now, applying dressings, having enough time again to pay attention to the man at the head of the table. He was watching the monitors like a hawk, his face fierce, absorbed, totally committed to what he was doing.

Inserting an endotracheal tube in a koala was always dangerous territory. If you went too deep there was a major risk

of traumatising the trachea and extending the tube into bronchus. She hadnât told him that. There hadnât been time, but heâd seemed to know it instinctively. How?

Maybe he was a vet, or maybe he did paediatric anaesthesia. Sometimes she thought paediatrics and veterinary science were inexplicably linked. Varying weights and sizes. The inability of the patient to explain where the pain was.

Who was he?

She was finished. Another check of the monitors. Pulse rate eighty. Blood oxygen saturation ninety percent.

Koala Thirty-seven just might live.

She couldnât help herself; she put her hand on the soft fur of the little koalaâs face and bestowed a silent blessing.

âYou keep on living,â she whispered. âYouâve come so far. You will make it.â

âShe might well,â Jake said. He was working surely and confidently, removing the endotracheal tube with care and watching with satisfaction as the little animal settled back into normal breathing pattern. âSo whoâs going to pay her bill?â

âNow thereâs a question,â she murmured. She was carrying the little animal carefully back to her cage in the corner. She wasnât out of the woods yetâshe knew that. Any procedure took it out of these wild animals, but at least there was hope.

Sheâd done all she could, she thought, arranging the IV line the little animal needed to provide fluids until she started eating again. Then she was finished.

Really finished, she thought suddenly. There was now nothing left to do.

The sensation was strange. For the six months since the fires Tori had worked nonstop. This place had been a refuge for injured wildlife from all over the mountain. Theyâd had up to fifty volunteers at one time, with Tori supervising the care of as many as three hundred animals. Kangaroos, wallabies, possums, cockatoos, koalasâso many koalas. So many battles. So much loss.

It was over. Those who could be saved had been saved, and were being re-introduced in the wild. The spring rains had come, the bush was regenerating; there was food and water out there for animals to re-establish territories.

This little koala was the last of her responsibilities. She glanced down at her and, as she did, she felt a wave of the deep grief that was always with her. All those sheâd failedâ¦

âIs it okay if I go now?â Becky said, glancing uncertainly at Jake. âItâs justâ¦Benâs picking me up. Heâll be waiting.â

âSure, Becky. Thanks for your help.â

âYou wonât need me again, will you?â

âNo.â She glanced back at the koala. If there was a need for more surgery, she knew what her decision would have to be, and for that she wouldnât need Becky.

âSee you, then,â Becky said. âIâm out of here. Hooray for the cityâIâm so over this place.â And with another curious glance at Jake she disappeared, closing the door behind her.

Leaving Tori with Jake.

âIâ¦ Thank you,â she managed. He looked pretty much like he had the night before. Slightly more casual. Faded jeans and a white, open-necked shirt. Elastic-sided boots. He looked like a local, she thought, which was at odds with his American accent.

âMy pleasure,â he said, and sounded like he meant it. âI didnât realise last night that you were a vet.â

âI didnât know you were.â

âIâm not.â

âSo inserting endotracheal tubes in koalas is just a splinter skill for, say, a television repairman?â

âIâm an anaesthetist. Jake Hunter.â

âAn anaesthetist,â Tori said blankly. âIn Combadeen? You have to be kidding.â

âIâm not kidding. Iâm staying at Manwillinbah Lodge.â

âRob Winstonâs place?â She was struggling now with the connection. What had Jake said last night? âI own properties here, in the valley and up on the ridge.â And Rob. Distracted, she thought of the pleasant young man whoâd flirted outrageously last night. She remembered him arriving with this man. With Jake. âWas Rob Winston the ninth date last night?â she demanded.

âThat was Rob.â

âHe was nice. Fun.â

âMeaning, I wasnât?â

âI didnât say that. But I wish Iâd known who he was,â she said ruefully. âHe should have told me. I need to thank him, and not only for letting us use this place. I had a friend who went to Manwillinbah Lodge when she was released from hospital two months ago. It wasnât right for her. She needed ongoing medical treatment, but that wasnât Robâs fault, and she said he tried so hard to give her time out. So many people around here need that.â She frowned, figuring more things out. âSo is thisâ¦is this your farm?â

âIt is.â

âOh, myâ¦â

Uh-oh.

Last night sheâd walked out on her landlord. On the guy whoâd made this whole hospital possible. âYouâve been giving this place to us rent free and I didnât even know who you were.â It was practically a wail and he grinned.

âThis is a whole new conversation topic. If weâd known last night we could have used our whole five minutes.â

She managed a smileâjust. How embarrassing. And how to retrieve the situation?

She should shake his hand. Or, um, not. She glanced down at her gloves and decided gratitude needed to wait. Plus she needed to catch her breath. Breath seemed in remarkably short supply.

âCould you excuse me for a moment?â she muttered. âI need to wash.â And she disappearedâshe almost ranâleaving him alone with Koala Number Thirty-seven.

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He was in the front room of what seemed to have been a grand old farmhouse. It still was, somewhere under the litter of what looked to be an animal hospital.

When the fires had ripped through here, almost fifty percent of properties on the ridge had been destroyed. The loss of life and property had been so massive thereâd been international television coverage. Horrified, heâd contacted Rob to see how he could help.

âThe lodge and the winery are okay,â Rob told him. âWeâre almost ten miles from where the fire front turned back on itself, so apart from smoke on the grapes thereâs little damage. Iâve been asked if we can provide emergency accommodation, if itâs

okay with you. And the farmhouse on the ridgeâ¦ Thereâs an animal-welfare place wanting headquarters. When the wind shifted, pushing the fire back on itself, your place was spared. Just. Thereâs still feed around it, and the house itself is basically okay, but your tenants are moving off the mountain. They canât cope with the mess and the smell, and theyâre going to her motherâs. Can the animal-welfare people use it for six months or so?â

âOf course,â heâd said, so it was now a hospitalâof sorts.

But as he looked around he thought he wouldnât have minded seeing it as it once wasâa gracious family home. And he wouldnât have minded seeing the bushland around here as it was either. The fire had burned to within fifty yards of the house and then turned. Beyond that demarcation, the bush was black and skeletal. Green tinges were showing through the ash now, alleviating the blackness, but six months ago it must have been a nightmare.

He stared out the window until Tori bustled back into the room, carrying a bucket of steaming, soapy water. She looked like a woman who didnât stay still for long, he thought. Busy. Clinically efficient. Cute?

Definitely still cute. She was in ancient jeans, an even more ancient T-shirt and a white clinical coat with a torn pocket. Her curls were again scraped back into a ponytail. Last night sheâd pulled them back with a ribbon. Today they were tied with an elastic band. She lookedâ¦workmanlike.

But workmanlike or not, he thought, nothing could hide her inherent sexiness. Why had he wasted time last night thinking she was dowdy?

When she left the room sheâd looked confused. Now, however, she looked relieved, as if sheâd spent her bucket-filling time figuring things out as well.

âI know now why youâre here,â she told him. âYouâre Old Docâs son. Jake. I loved your father.â She hesitated as if she wanted to say something else, but then thought better of it.

âSo youâre here to put this farm on the market,â she continued briskly. âThatâs fine, but first I need to thank you.â She abandoned her bucket, put her hands out and grasped his, holding them in the same strong grip of the night before, a grip

that made him wonder how heâd ever thought her a mouse. The connection felt strangelyâ¦right.

But Tori wasnât noticing connections. She was moving right on.

âI canât tell you how grateful weâve been,â she said. âItâs been fabulousâand Barb said you wonât take any rent. Itâs been truly lifesaving.â She looked across at the little koala in her cage, and her business-like tone faltered a little. âAnd now youâll sell. Thatâs fine. We donât need it any more. As soon as this one goesâ¦â

âSheâs the only one here now?â

âWe release as soon as we can,â she said, efficient again. âWild animals respond to captivity with stress. Thereâs a few that are too damaged to survive on their own, but weâve relocated them all now to bigger animal shelters. Places where they can have as close to a normal life as possible. So yes, thereâs only this little one here now. And me.â

He frowned. âYouâre living here?â

âIâ¦ Yes. I hope you donât mind. Itâs easier.â

âYouâre on twentyâfour-hour call?â

âNot many of my patients buzz me. Itâs not as hard as it sounds.â She was opening the door onto the verandah and ushering him out, almost before he was aware of what she was doing.

There was a small dog lying on an ancient settee by the door. Heâd seen him as he arrived. He was some sort of terrier, a nondescript brown-and-white mutt who hadnât bothered checking Jake out when he arrived. Too old to care? He glanced up now, gave a feeble wag of his tail and then went back to what he was doing.

Which wasnât sleeping, Jake realised. He was staring down the valley, as if he was waiting for someone.

Tori touched the dogâs ears, and the dog nosed her palm and went right back to looking. Waiting to go home?

âYouâll be looking forwards to going home,âhe ventured, and saw a flash of pain, hidden fast. Uh-oh, he thought. Stupid. If she was staying hereâ¦ Sheâd be one of the hundreds burned out.

She hesitated and he knew he was right, but it was too late to retrieve the situation. âI guess I must be,â she said slowly before he could think what else to say, and she shrugged. âNo, of course

I am. Itâs time I moved on.â

âIs that what you were doing last nightâmoving on?â

âWhat I was doing last night was being conned by my friend. I gather you were conned as well. So when do you need me to move out?â

âI donâtââ

âItâll be soon. Youâll need to clean the place up before you put it on the market. Thereâs a lot of smoke damage. Do you want to look through now?â She glanced at her watch. âI have a teleconference in five minutes with our local shelter staffers, but you could look around yourself.â

âIâd be happier if you could show me personally.â

Why had he said that? Surely he could see what he needed from here. What point was there doing a detailed inspection, and why did he need a personal tour from Tori?

She had him fascinated. There was something about the way her hand had shaken his, brisk, efficient, but alsoâ¦there was something vulnerable about her. Something he couldnât figure out.

She wasnât sounding vulnerable, though. She was organising. âI can show you,â she said, âbut if you want the personal tour itâll have to be later in the day. But tomorrow would be better.â

âIs nine in the morning all right?â

âSure. When are you going back to the States?â

âMonday.â Six days away.

Suddenly six days seemed okay. If he kept the resort there was only this place to organise. He could be here again tomorrow and be shown over the property by Tori. Those jeansâ¦ Heâd never seen jeans look this good on a woman.

âI do need to get in to my teleconference,â she said, a bit sharply, and he pulled himself together. What was he thinking? This woman was a country mouseâa vet who lived on the other side of the world to him. If she hadnât stood him up on a five-minute dateâ¦

Was that what this was? Bruised ego?

âThank you very much for saving my koala,â she said, starting to edge away.

âWhatâs she called?â

âI donât name them. You get attached if you name them.â

âYou donât get attached?â

âI try hard not to. Now if youâll excuse meâ¦â

âOf course,â he said, but he was still surprised when she stepped back inside the house and closed the door sharply behind her.

She wasnât a time waster, then, Dr. Nicholls. He didnât waste time eitherâbut he couldnât help feeling piqued. Most women reacted to him differently to the way this woman had.

What was he thinking?

Nothing. There was nothing to think about. He gave himself a mental swipe to the side of the head and headed back to his rental car. He should get back to the States fast if he thought shabby little country vets were cute. If he thought shabby little country vets were fascinating.

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He wasnât to know that one shabby little country vet watched him until he was out of sight.

Boy, was she hopeless. She twitched the smoke-stained drapes back into place and glowered at nothing in particular. One gorgeous male, and here she was, feelingâ¦weird. Which was dumb. The last thing she needed in her life was another man.

So why had she let Barb talk her into five-minute dating?

Because, with the leaving of the army of volunteers, sheâd become so lonely she was starting to talk to walls.

Dad. Micki.

Donât go there.

There werenât even enough animals left to talk to. She returned to the makeshift surgery and stooped to check the little koala. She was barely conscious. So small. So battered.

Maybe it had been a mistake to keep on trying.

âLive,â she whispered, almost fiercely. âYou must get better. You must start living again.â

She knew she must, too.

She glanced out the window to the west and flinched like she always did. She could just see the chimney stack which was all that was left of the house sheâd lived in forever.

Her dad. Her sister.

âMove on,â she whispered. âGet yourself a nice little town

house in the city. You can be a pet vet. Take care of allergies, dew claws, vaccinations.â

Maybe she would. It was justâ¦she didnât feel ready yet.

In a couple of weeks this little koala should be ready to move on to a wildlife refuge and this place would be sold to be a home again. But not her home. Sheâd sheltered here for long enough. It was time to face the world again.

She knew she could. Sheâd schooled herself to be independent.

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So why was the thought of Jake Hunter walking away so disturbing?

âSo whatâs the story with Tori?â he asked Rob.

It was after dark. There were only two guests staying at Manwillinbah Lodge right now, and both had gone to bed early. Rob had organised a theatre nightâan old showing of *Casablanca*. Heâd set up a themed dinner, decorated the sitting room with black-and-white posters, even worn a hatâbut both his guests were weary and just wanted their own beds.

They were fire victims, too, Jake had discovered. Both were elderly women, living in temporary accommodation, organising to rebuild. Theyâd come here for time out, because the process was leaving them exhausted, and all they wanted to do was sleep.

It left Rob dissatisfied, though. He loved being the entertainer, but by eight he was left to entertain himself and his boss. They sat on the back porch and watched the stars and drank beerâand Jake pushed.

âTori,â he prodded again. âTell me about her.â

âI donât even know her.â

âBut Barbâs told you.â

âNope. Thereâre tragedies everywhere and if youâre not told you donât ask. Some people need to talk about it, some people canât. All I know is that she was put in charge of the wildlife rescue effort and she was vet up on the ridge before the fires. I didnât know she was staying on-site but I did say they could use it for whatever they wanted. I told you that when I phoned.â

He had. Thereâd been a couple of days when the news coming through from Australia was dreadful. Heâd been ready to

promise anything.

He still was.

âI donât want to kick Tori out,â he said now, uneasily. âIf she still wants to live thereâ¦â

âShe doesnât. Barb says as soon as the last animal goes, so will she. Itâs fine to put it on the market.â

âDoes she have somewhere to go?â

âI have no idea,â Rob said, giving him a curious glance. âIâve never met the lady until last night, and five minutes with her didnât give me much time for in-depth questions. Yours was worseâhow many questions did you manage in your minute and a half?â

âDonât rub it in,â Jake growled. âI donât make a great speed dater.â

âI donât think you make an anything dater,â Rob said, pouring another beer. âBut youâve met the lady properly today. Whatâs she like?â

âSmart. Tired. Worried.â And very cute, he thought, but he didnât say it. Really sexy, despite those appalling clothes.

âTired and worried equals everyone up here in the hills,â Rob said, not hearing his afterthoughts. âSo weâre back to smart. How smart?â

âSheâs a vet.â

âAnd?â

âAnd she had the gumption to walk away from me when I was being anââ

âI know exactly what you were being,â Rob said, and had the temerity to grin. âGood for Tori.â

âShe practically told me to leave today, too.â

âYouâre kidding. Itâs your property.â

âWhich sheâs legally entitled to be on. Oh, she wasnât rude. She evicted me in the most businesslike way. Maybe sheâs a man hater.â

âNot if she agreed to dating. So youâre interested?â

âIâm not interested. Iâm just concerned. Where has everyone else gone whose houses burned?â

âRelatives, friends, or thereâs a whole town of mobile homesârelocatablesâset up further down the valley for anyone who needs them. Youâll have passed them on your way from the

airport.â

âSheâll go there?â

âWhy donât you ask her?â

âItâs none of my business.â

âSo why do you want to know?â

He didnât have an answer. He sat on, staring into the night, and finally Rob left him to his silence.

Leaving Jake alone with half a bottle of beer, a starlit sky and a silence so immense it was enough to take his breath away.

A faint rustle came from beside him. A wallaby was watching from the edge of the garden, moonlight glinting on its silvery fur.

âHi,â Jake said, but the wallaby took fright and disappeared into the shadows. Leaving Jake alone again.

He should go inside. He had journals to study. He didnât doâ¦nothing.

But the stars were immense, and somewhere under them, alone up on the mountain, was Tori.

A woman with shadows?

She was nothing to do with him. So why did a faint, insistent murmur in his head tell him that she was?

CHAPTER THREE

He arrived at the farmhouse at nine the next morning and nobody answered the door.

He knocked three times. The same van heâd seen yesterday was in the driveway but there were no sounds coming from the house. There was no dog on the settee.

He tried the door and it opened, unlocked and undefended. âHi, Tori,â he called. âItâs Jake.â

Still no answer.

Sheâd been expecting him.

Should he come back later? He hesitated and then thought maybe she was in the surgery again, doing something that couldnât be interrupted. He went through cautiouslyâand stopped at the open door.

Even from here he could tell the koala was dead. The little animal was facing him, curled on her side, still. The cage door was open.

He crossed to the cage and stooped, putting his hand on her fur to make sure. But yes, she was gone. Simply, he thought. There was no sign of distress. The IV lines Tori had attached yesterday had been removed but were lying neatly to the side, as if theyâd been removed after death.

She looked as if sheâd hardly moved since yesterday.

Sheâd simply died.

Heâd had patients whoâd done thisâjust died. The operation had been a success, yet the assault on their bodies had been too great, their hearts had simply stopped.

Mostly it happened in the aged, where maybe thereâd been a question of whether the operation should have been done at all, only how could you convince a patient that you couldnât remove cancer because there was a risk of heart failure? Maybe you tried, but the patient could elect to have the operation anyway.

He hated cases like those. He hated this.

He knelt and saw, closer now and more dreadfully, the full extent of scar tissue. He thought about what this little animal must have gone through in the past six months and he knew that yesterdayâs decision to operate must have been a hard one for Tori to make.

Where was she?

He glanced around, out through the window, and then he saw her. She was out at the edge of the clearing, and he knew what she was doing.

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Hadnât she cried enough?

She didnât get attached to her patients. She couldnât. Getting attached was the way of madness.

She was crying so hard she could barely see the ground she was trying to dig.

This was the first of the animals sheâd tried to bury. Up until now thereâd been volunteers taking away bodies of the animals sheâd failed.

This was the end. Her last failure. If sheâd known it would turn out like this sheâd have euthanised her six months ago.

Sheâd had to make a decision. Sheâd got it wrong, and there were no volunteers left to bury her.

So much loss. So much appalling waste. Dad, Micki, one tiny baby with no life at allâ¦

One little koala who somehow represented them all.

âI canât do this any more,â she whispered and hit the ground with the spade. The spade shuddered back. Was she hitting tree roots?

She swore and hit the ground again. Three spade lengths away, Rusty flinched, as if the little dog felt every shudder.

âYou and me both,â she told Rusty and shoved the spade uselessly down again. This was dumb, dumb, dumb, but she did not want to take the little koalaâs body down the mountain to the veterinary crematorium. *She did not.*

All she could see was the Combadeen cemetery, two graves with brass headstones. Dad. Micki. Mickiâs with a tiny extra plaque, white on silver.

No.

She shoved the spade down hard again, uselessly. She gulped back tearsâand suddenly the spade was taken out of her hands.

Where he came from she didnât know. She knew nothing, only that the spade was tossed aside, two strong arms enfolded her and held her close. And let her sob.

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Heâd never held a woman like this. Heâd never felt emotion like this.

Jake was chief anaesthetist in a specialist teaching hospital in Manhattan. Once upon a time heâd spent time with patients, but that seemed long since. Now he handled only critical cases. Patient interviews and examinations were done by his juniors. His personal contact with patients was confined to reassurance as they slipped under anaesthetic, and occasional further reassurance as they regained consciousness.

If there were problems during an operation, it was mostly the surgeon who talked to the family. As anaesthetist Jake took no risks. He did his job and he did it well. There were seldom times he needed to talk. Now, as he faced Toriâs real and dreadful grief, he realised he actively kept away from this type of anguish.

His mother had cried at him all of his life. Heâd done with tears.

And this was just a koala.

Just a koala. Even as he thought it, he recalled the limp little body lying alone down at the house, the scar tissue, the evidence of a six-month battle now lost. He looked around him and saw the blackened skeletons of a ravaged forest. His mother had cried for cryingâs sake. He knew instinctively that Toriâs tears were very different.

So much deathâ¦

Tori was trying desperately to pull herself together, sniffing against his shirt, tugging back. âIâm sorry,â she managed. âThis is stupid. It was a risk, operating on her. I should have put her down. I should haveâ¦â

âYou werenât to know what you should or shouldnât have done,â he said gently. âYou did your best. Thatâs all anyone can ask.â

âNo, but she was wild. Sheâs been through so much.â

âYou didnât add to that. Tori, you had to give her every

chance.â

âBut was I operating for me?â she demanded, sounding desperate. Sheâd managed to pull back now and was wiping her hand furiously across her cheeks. âI named her! How stupid was that?â

âYou told me you didnât.â

âI told everyone I didnât. All the volunteers Iâve worked with. The nurses. The drivers. The firefighters who brought animals in. I told them we canât afford to get attached. There are so many. If we get attached weâll go crazy. Letâs do our best for every individual animal and letâs stay dispassionate.â

There was nothing dispassionate about Tori. She looked wild. Her face was blotched from weeping. The spade she was working with was covered with ashes and dirt. Her hands were filthy and sheâd wiped her hands across her sodden face.

She looked like someone whoâd just emerged from this burned-out forestâa fire victim herselfâand something inside him felt her pain. Or felt more than that. It hurt that she was hurting, and it hurt a lot.

He wanted to hug her againâbadlyâbut she was past hugging. She had her arms folded across her breasts in an age-old gesture of defence. Trying to stop an agony that was unstoppable?

This was much more than the death of one koala, he thought, as bad as that was. There were levels to this pain that he couldnât begin to understand.

âKeep yourself to yourself.â His motherâs words sounded through the years. âDonât get involvedâyouâll only get hurt.â

Wise advice? Heâd always thought so, but right now it was advice he was planning to ignore.

âWhat did you call her?â he asked, and she hiccupped on a sob and tried to glare at him. It didnât come off. How could it?

âManyaâ

Why was she glaring? Did she think heâd mock?

Maybe she did. He knew instinctively that Tori was assessing him and withdrawing. As if heâd think she was stupidâwhen stupid was the last thing heâd think her.

âWhy Manya?â he asked, searching for the right words to break through. âWhat does it mean?â

âJustâ¦âlittle one.â Itâs from the language of the native people from around here. Not that it matters. It was onlyâ¦ I

talked to her.â She sounded desperate again, and totally bewildered. âI had to call her something. I had to talk to her.â

âI guess you did,â he said. And then, as she still seemed to be drawing in on herself, he thought maybe he *could* make this professional. Maybe itâd make it easier. âDo you know why she died?â

âNo.â She spread her filthy hands and stared down at them, as if they could give her some clue. She shook her head. âOr maybe I do. Sheâs been under stress for months but I thought we were winning. I knew she wouldnât be able to go back to the wild, but there are sanctuaries thatâd take her, good places thatâd seem like freedom. And she was so close. But one tiny abscessâ¦ It must have been the last straw. She was fine when I checked on her at seven, and when I checked at eight she was dead. Everything justâ¦stopped.â

âIt does happen,â he said softly. âTo people, too.â

âHave you had it happen to patients?â she managed, and he knew she was struggling hard to sound normal. Her little dog nosed forwards and she picked him up and held him against her, shield-like. He licked her nose and she held him harder.

The dog was missing a leg, he saw with a shock, and his initial impression of him as an old dog changed. Not old. Wounded.

As Tori was wounded.

Have you had it happen to patients? Toriâs question was still out there, and maybe talking medicine was the way to go until she had herself together.

âNot often,â he told her, âbut yes, I have. That it hasnât happened often means Iâve been lucky.â

âAs opposed to me,â she said grimly. âIâve lost countless patients in the past six months.â

She looked exhausted to the point of collapse, he thought. Had she slept at all last night?

When had she last slept?

âYour patients are wild creatures,â he said, and he felt as if he was picking his way through a minefield, knowing it was important that she talk this out, but suspecting she could close up at any minute. âMy patients are the moneyed residents of Manhattan. Thereâs no way a rich, private hospital will cause them stress, and thereâs the difference.â He hesitated. âTori, let

me dig for you.â

âI can do it.â She put the little dog down and grabbed the spade again.

âCan you?â

She closed her eyes, gave herself a minute and then opened them. âNo. This is dumb. I accept that now. The groundâs one huge root ball. Iâll take her down the mountain and get her cremated.â

âBut you donât want to.â

âJustâ¦just because I named her,â she whispered, hugging the spade, while the little dog nosed her boots in worry. âI wanted her buried here. At least the edges of the bush here are still alive. I wanted her buried under living trees. Does that make sense?â

âIt does,â he said, strongly and surely, and before she could protest again, he took the spade from her hands and started digging.

She was right. The ground was so hard it would be more sensible to cremate her. Only there was something about Tori that said this burial was deeply important on all sorts of levels. So he put all his weight behind the spade and it slid a couple of inches in. Slowly he got through the hardened crust to the root-filled clay below, while Tori watched on in silence.

After a couple of minutes she sank to her knees and gathered the little dog against her.

âWhatâs his name?â he asked, trying not to sound like the digging was as hard as it was.

âRusty.â

âHow did he lose his leg?â

âFire,â she said harshly, and he glanced at the little dog in surprise. Heâd lost his leg but he wasnât otherwise scarred.

âHe was burned?â

âWasnât everything around here?â She hugged him closer and got another nose lick for her pains. âBut Rusty was luckyâsort of. He wasâ¦ I found him in the fireplace ofâ¦of where I lived. Over there.â She motioned to the neighbouring property. âPart of the bricks had collapsed, trapping his leg, but otherwise he was okay. He was my dadâs Rusty. Heâs just waiting âtil he comes home.â

Her voice broke. No more questions were allowed, Jake

thought, while she struggled for control, so he kept right on digging.

It took time. Ten minutes. Fifteen. He wasnât in a hurry. This was giving Tori time to catch her breath, figure if she wanted to tell him more.

There were cockatoos screeching in the gums about his head. Apart from the birds and the sound of the spade against the earth, there was nothing but silence.

What had happened to this woman? He shouldnât ask, but finally he had to.

âSo who did you lose?â he asked into the silence, and for a while he thought she wouldnât answer.

Then, âMy father and my sister,â she said flatly, dreadfully. âMy sister was eight months pregnant.â

Dear God, he thought helplessly. Where to take this from here? âYou all lived over there?â he tried.

âWe did. Mickiâ¦ Margaretâ¦ My sisterâs relationship had fallen apart and sheâd come home, so she could have her baby with us. Toby and I were going to look after her for the first few weeks after the birth.â She took a deep breath. âBut then they died. Dad and Micki and Benedict. Benedict was Mickiâs baby. A little boy. She was going to call him Benedict. I found Rusty three days later when I finally got back up here, but there was nothing else left. Nothing.â

It took his breath away. He felt ill. But desperately he wanted to help, and somehow he knew that the only way to do that was to keep on going. Keep diggingâand keep on talking.

âSoâ¦Toby?â

âToby was my fiancÃ©.â

âBut he wasnât killed?â

âWhat do you think?â She laughed, mirthlessly, and buried her face in her dogâs soft fur. Her laugh sounded close to hysteria.

He let her be for a moment, pushing the spade deeper into the tree roots. The grave was deep enough, but he knew instinctively that if he stopped, then so would she. Sheâd get back to the business of livingâbut maybe talking about the dying would help?

Heâd done a bit of psychology in medical school but heâd never practised it. Now, however, what to do seemed to be

instinctive. A human skill rather than a professional one? Whatever, it seemed to be working.

âSorry,â she said at last, sniffing and giving Rusty a bit of slack. âThatâ¦that sounds dumb. Of course youâd think heâd be killed. But Tobyâ¦well, Toby was a charmer, and he was also a survivor. He was a lovely, vibrant guy, a photographer who came up here last autumn and took pictures of the mountains, took pictures of my vet clinicâand finally stayed.â

She paused again but then went on, more in control now. âI need to tell youâ¦ Dad started the vet practice up here when Micki and I were kids. Mum died early but Dad looked after us really well. We had a great childhood. Micki married and moved interstateâI did veterinary science. Then Dad was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. The past couple of years have been hard. But then along came Toby and he made us both laugh. He brought the house to life, and when he asked me to marry him I donât know who was happier, me or Dad. Toby didnât have any money, but what could be more natural than he stay here? His photography would take off, Iâd do the vet work I love and weâd live happily ever after.â

He let that sink in for a bit, and dug a few more spadefuls. This was getting to be a very deep hole and still he didnât have the full story. âButâ¦âhe prompted softly, and he thought she wouldnât answer but finally she did.

âSo then Micki came home for Christmas because her relationship had ended. She was having a tough pregnancy but Toby charmed her as well. Maybeâ¦maybe things between Toby and me werenât as good as they could have been but Micki and Dad loved him.â

âAnd then the fires hit.â

âThen the heat hit,â she said dully. âMicki was so pregnant she could hardly move. Dad was having one of his bad spells. He could hardly move. On the dayâ¦ It was so hot. There was no sign of fires, but I was nervous. Everyone was nervous. Then the district nurse rang to say she didnât want to come up the mountain because she was scared her car might boil. But Dad had run out of his medication. So I made a run down into the valley. Iâd only be away for an hour or so. Toby was here with the other car. What could go wrong? And then the fires hit.â

âThereâs no needâ¦â he said, hearing the raw anguish in her

voice and not wanting to make her say it. Heâd stopped digging now. He moved towards her but she waved him back.

âLet me finish,â she whispered. âHe heard on the radio that there were fires on the other side of the ridgeâthatâs where they started. So Toby took the van and went to see. He took magnificent photographs. You probably saw themâthey were the ones beamed around the world the next day, after the wind changed and over a hundred people were killed, and Dad and Micki and Benedict and all the animals in our vet clinic were left without a vehicle to escape in. Dad put Rusty in the fireplace and protected him with his body. Our three big dogsâMutsy and Pogo and Bandit, they died, too. One little dog was all they could save.â

Once more he made a move to go to her, but she flinched. She swiped her hand across her face again and she sniffed. Trying desperately to move on. âEnough,â she said bleakly. âToby made a fortune, and I lost everything. I promised Micki sheâd be safe here, but it didnât happen. I failed her as I failedâ¦so many. Trusting Toby. Leaving the mountain. But itâs dopey to keep crying. Weâll bury Manya, and then Rusty and I will move on.

âWhere?â

âI donât know,â she whispered. âThis is where I belong but I donât know any more. Look, itâs deep enough. I can do the rest.â

âYouâll do nothing,â he growled. âIâm the undertaker, today. Stay.â

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He helped Tori gather sheaths of fresh eucalyptus leaves. He carried the little body from the house. They laid her on a bed of the leaves sheâd loved, they covered her with more leaves and then he filled in the grave. They spread more leaves on the freshly dug earth, and then Jake stood back, silent, not knowing where to go next.

Not knowing how to help.

He wanted to hold her again, but Tori was standing apart, rigid, as if ashamed at her previous show of emotion.

âThank you,â she whispered. âThank you so much. Iâ¦ When do you want your house back?â

âLetâs look at it now,â he said and held out his hand. She looked at it but she didnât take it. Her reserve was back again. The woman whoâd sobbed her heart out was well hidden.

âOf course,â she said, stiffly, and led the way back down to the house, with Rusty limping along behind them. She ushered him into one room after another, letting him see it all.

Apart from yesterday heâd never been in this house. When his father died it had already been let to tenants whoâd wanted to keep renting. A realtor had acted as intermediary, and thereâd been no opportunity or need for him to see it.

The grand old homestead was battered now, from years of renting, from six months of being used as an animal hospital and from the fires themselves. The building hadnât burned but it was still smoke stained and grim. The only furniture was what theyâd needed for the animal hospital.

The last room Tori showed him was what was obviously the master bedroom. He stood at the door and saw how sheâd been living for the past six months, and he drew in his breath in dismay.

There was a camp stretcher in the corner. There were half a dozen cardboard cartons acting as storage and as a bedside table. A basket lay in the corner for Rusty.

Nothing else.

At speed dating heâd thought sheâd looked dowdy. It was a miracle sheâd managed to look presentable at all.

âNo mirror?â he asked, trying to make it sound as though he was joking.

âNo mirror.â Sheâd recovered a little now; her voice was firmer. Moving on. âJust as well, as I suspect Iâd scare myself silly.â

âYou look all right to me.â

âSaid the man who looked at me like I was a porrywiggle on our five-minute date.â

âA what?â

âA tadpole. Something that wiggles out of pond scum.â

âI never saidâ¦â

âYou never had to. Have you seen enough?â

âMore than enough. Are these all your possessions?â

âI live light,â she said, in a tight voice. âI can be gone in half an hour.â

âWhere are you staying tonight?â

âYouâre not kicking me out tonight?â she demanded, alarmed, and he shook his head.

âIâm not kicking you out at all. Iâm asking if you have an alternativeâsomething a bit less appalling than here.â

âHereâs fine.â

âHereâs not fine. This place needs an army to make it habitable.â

âItâs a lovely house.â

âIt could be a lovely house. Itâs anything but now. Do you have anywhere you can go?â

âOf course I do,â she retorted, but he thought that she was lying.

There were all sorts of emotions twisting inside him right now. He didnât want to get involvedâwhen had he ever?âbut walking away from herâ¦

Heâd be as bad as Toby if he left her anchored to this place, to her grief, to her loss.

âCome down to Manwillinbah Lodge,â he found himself saying. âYou know the lodge?â

âI know it, butâ¦â

âBut what?â

âI canât.â

âWhy not?â

âItâs your place.â

âItâs a guesthouse and itâs almost empty. So Iâm offering, and I believe youâd be sensible to accept.â He spread his hands. âTori, either you stay here tonight in this bleak and lonely place and, I suspect, cry your eyes out again for a little koala called Manya, or you come down the mountain and let Rob take care of you while you regroup.â Then, as she hesitated, he added, âYou know, youâd be doing Rob a favour. He loves the lodge being full and he loves company. Since the fire, all his guests have come and stared out into the night and not wanted to talk.â

âI donât think I want to talk.â

âNo, but our housekeeper can cook for you, and Rob can make you smile. Robâs good with people.â

She looked at him curiously at that. âYou talk as if you mean

youâre not.â

âIâm not a people person.â

âYet you let me soak your shirt.â

âSometimes Iâm compelled to be a people person.â

âThat sounds like your five-minute date. Like you want to be out of here.â

âI didnât mean it to sound like that,â he said, flinching. Hell, he had to figure out how to sound nice.

But to his relief she was smiling, a faint smile but a smile nonetheless. âYeah, okay, youâre not a people person but you did very well just now,â she said. âI was really grateful for your shirt and you held on manfully. So whether you wanted to bolt or not, the fact is you didnât and Iâm not asking questions.â She turned and looked down at her camp bed, at the detritus of six monthsâ camping in this sooty, makeshift home. He could see her indecision.

âYou donât really want to stay here.â

âI have Rusty.â Though Rusty was on the verandah again, staring fixedly at the road. Still endlessly waiting.

âRusty can come with you. Stay in the lodge while you figure where to go.â

She stared down at the camp stretcher again. âIâve been offered a job,â she said. âIn a small-animal clinic down the mountain.â

âWill you take it?â

âI donâtâ¦I donât know.â

âWhen did you last sleep through the night?â

âI donât know that either,â she admitted, and people person or not, he took her hands in his and held.

âTori, youâre in no state to decide anything. Come to the lodge. Let Rob look after you for a month or so.â

âA month? No.â

âOkay, come for tonight and take it from there,â he said hastily. âBut you need to sleep and you need to start thinking of something other than destruction.â

âThatâs what Barb said when she talked me into five-minute dating,â she whispered. âI need to move on. It doesnât work. How can it?â

âYeah, well, maybe the dating wasnât a great idea for either

of us,â he said ruefully. âLetâs try it another way.â

âDo you need to move on, too?â

âNo,â he said blankly. âI meant you.â

She looked up at him then, and another glimmer of a smile crossed her face. âReally? Itâs only me whoâs got ghosts? Why do I get the feeling youâre as strained as I am?â

âIâm not.â

âOkay.â She pulled her hands away and held them up in surrender. âYouâre staying at the lodge as well?â

âUntil Monday.â

âYou think you can stand my company?â

âOf course I can.â

âThereâs no âof courseâ about it,â she said, still with a touch of humour. âOne and a half minutes, as I remember.â

âIt was you who walked out.â

âSo it was,â she said, and suddenly her smile became real. âAnd I can do it again if life gets tricky. But nowâ¦ Does the lodge have baths?â

âThereâs a spa in every room.â

âA spa,â she said, awed.

âAnd a heated swimming pool. And beds with so many down-filled pillows you canât count them. One of Robâs ditzy blondes did his decorating for him, and I have to say she canât have been as ditzy as most.â

âDitzy?â

âRob thinks ditzy equals sexy.â

âAnd you donât?â

âUm, no.â

âWell, Iâm not even going to go there,â she said and her smile was still in place. âI canât imagine what woman would have tied you to speed dating for more than five minutes. But look, I need to clear up here. If Rob agrees to having Rusty and meâ¦â

âOf course heâll agree. Iâm the owner.â

âHeâs the manager. Iâll phone and check,â she said, with a touch of reproof. âAnd Iâm paying. Letâs make this formal.â

âYou will not pay.â

âIâll pay or I wonât come,â she said with asperity. âAnd donât look at me like that. Iâve spent almost nothing in six

months, and Iâm tired of charity. I know that sounds ungrateful,â she said, suddenly rueful, âbut there it is. Iâll phone him, Iâll lock up and Iâll come down later this afternoon.â

He was being dismissed?

âCan I help clean up?â

âNo,â she said. âThank you, Dr. Hunter.â

âJake,â he growled. âAnd donât be pig-headed. I *will* help you.â

âJake, she said, but still with a touch of formality. âAnd pig-headed or not, Iâd like to clean up by myself.â

And suddenly he could see her hidden agenda. He could take offence at her knocking back his helpâor he could understand.

This place was filled with six monthsâ memories. She needed to say goodbye on her own terms.

She might well cry again. The thought was bad but he suspected she needed to, and she certainly had the right.

How could he ever have thought her frumpy? How could he ever have thought she was uninteresting?

He gazed down into her troubled face and he thought suddenly, Iâd like to hold her again. And then he thoughtâ¦ Iâd really like to kiss her. It wasnât sympathy now. She had so many levels. She was such a womanâ¦

He couldnât kiss her. Of course he couldnât; sheâd run a mile and the thought was totally illogical.

And besides, he thought, trying hard for logical, she was too dirty, too tear-stained, too *not the sort of woman he kissed*.

But as she turned away, as she knelt to start filling boxes, he looked down at her, in her tight, faded jeans clinging to her neat figure like a second skin, at her torn T-shirt, at the way a curl was wisping down the nape of her neckâ¦and he was aware of a sharp stab of missed opportunity.

What would she be like to kiss?

He didnât know, and he had no business thinking about finding out. He formed relationships with women who knew the rulesâindependent women who wanted nothing but a lighthearted relationship which went nowhere.

Would Tori understand those rules? He knew she wouldnât, and there was no way he was risking giving pain.

So he wanted to kiss her but he couldnât. She didnât even want his help cleaning this houseâand he had to respect her

wishes.

âIâll see you down at the lodge,â he said, more harshly than he intended. âBefore dinner?â

âSee you then,â she said without looking up. âThank you, again, Jake.â

So that was that. He turned and left, leaving Tori shoving welfare clothes into welfare boxes. Packing up life as she knew itâand moving on.

While a little dog watched Jakeâs car until it disappeared from view.

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The place was a mess. She gazed around the house and thought she couldnât just walk out. It wasnât fair.

She should have let Jake help, and maybe if it hadnât been Jake she would have. But then Jake wasnât anyone else. The man had her thoroughly off balance. The equilibrium sheâd striven so hard to reach had been tossed off course by the death of one little koalaâand then by the way sheâd reacted to Jake.

For this was more than grief.

Barb said she had to move on. Her head told her she couldnât, but her body was telling her it was more than time.

So sheâd thought he was lovely and sheâd sobbed all over him. What a turn-on. She headed into the bathroom to fetch her toiletries. Despite what sheâd told Jake there was a mirror there, and she saw what she looked like. A nightmare.

âJust forget it,â she said fiercely to a pile of second-hand clothes she had no use for. âYour body would react to anything in pants right now. Youâre needy and weepy and pathetic. So get a grip and donât even begin to think that Jake Hunterâs seeing you as anything more than a basket case.â

She sniffed.

âAnd donât go blubbering about that as well,â she snapped to her reflection, and headed back to the bedroom and kicked the closest cardboard box, which promptly collapsed. She stared at it as if itâd personally betrayed herâand then the phone rang.

âDoc Nicholls?â

âYes.â

âItâs Combadeen Cleaners,â a womanâs voice said. âWeâve been paid to clean the place youâre using up on the ridge. Cart

away garbage. Give stuff to welfare. Scrub. Do whatever you want.â

âYouâve been paid?â she said cautiously.

âThis guyâJake Hunter?âapparently he owns the lodge as well as your place? He said youâre moving out. If itâs okay with you, he said you do what you want, then leave the rest for us. When youâre finished, leave a key on the kitchen table. Weâll collect it tonight. Weâll clean and lock up after our-selves. But itâs only if you want us. He made that clear. Weâve been paid already but itâs up to you.â

Itâs up to you. Jake understood. He was helping, but on her terms. The offer took her breath away.

For the past six months sheâd been in charge. Sheâd been giving instructions. Sheâd organised.

Jake had listened to what sheâd said, but heâd heard the underlying message and heâd organised around her.

The woman was giving her time to think about it. She gazed around her, at six monthsâ chaos of a house being used as an animal hospital.

She should do it herself.

Jake was bossy, she thought. He was autocratic. He also scared her, just a little, the way he understood.

Logic said she should stay right away from Jake Hunter and his grandiose gestures.

It wasnât going to happen. She sniffed again and thought if she cried one more time today sheâd need an IV line to replace fluids.

âThank you,â she said simply. âI accept with pleasure.â

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Would she come?

Jake paced the lodge and thought he should have been more insistent.

Why was it so important she accept?

He didnât know. He only knew that it was.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sheâd done what she could. The cleaners could deal with the rest. Tori sat in her little white van with Rusty close beside her, and thought leaving wasnât as easy as it sounded.

Stupid or not, it was a grief in itself. Moving away from the ridgeâ¦

She and Rusty had spent the first dreadful nights after the fire on Barbâs couch. Then, when theyâd found Jakeâs place and settled that it could be a staging post for injured wildlife, it had seemed sensible that she move in here. Six months later she was still not looking further than her next patient. Until now.

Rusty was staring out the window with longing, along the road that led to her burned-out home.

Home.

She closed her eyes. It didnât help to be angryâshe knew thatâbut the rage she felt towards Toby was still real and dreadful. That she could have imagined she loved himâ¦ He hadnât come near her since the fire, which was just as well. He was a coward of the worst kindâand sheâd thought sheâd loved him.

So donât trust your stupid heart again, she told herself. Move on from the ridge but do not trust.

She was trying to get her tired mind to think.

Maybe accepting Jakeâs invitation for accommodation at the lodge was a mistake, she decided. But staying up here tonight in the empty refuge seemed unthinkable, and landing on Barb again was equally impossible. There were relocatable homes set up down in the valley for anyone displaced by the fires. She could move into one of those.

But not tonight, she thought. Sheâd give herself this night of respite.

A night with Jake?

No.

This was a night at a lovely guesthouse, she told herself fiercely. It had nothing to do with Jake. It was a night of indulgence before moving onto practicalities. To the dreary other sideâ¦

She glanced at Rusty, sitting passively beside the cardboard box that held all her worldly possessions, the practical thingsâchanges of clothes, toiletries, things sheâd had to find to survive.

She would survive. She and Rusty.

âAnd weâll come back to the ridge,â she told the little dog as he looked mournfully along the road towards where they used to live. âDad and Micki and Benedict, and Mutsy and Pogo and Banditâtheyâre still here. Just a little bit, but theyâre still here.â

But for now they had to leave.

âWeâll come back,â she said again, and she flicked the engine into life and drove out the gateâand to Rustyâs great sorrow she turned right instead of left, down into the valley instead of where theyâd left so much. âI promise you, Rusty. Weâll come home.â

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She was coming. She rang Rob and it was all Jake could do not to listen in on the extension.

âYouâre really worried about her,â Rob said when he finished.

âSheâs had a tough time.â

âSo has half this valley.â

âI donât know half this valley,â he growled. âI know Tori.â

âOnly since yesterdayâ¦ Right,â Rob said thoughtfully. âSo shall we give her the honeymoon suite?â

âWhat?â

âThe best,â Rob said patiently. âThe one I tried to put you in. Itâs expensive.â

âYes, but charge her half-rates.â

âYou donât want to give it to her free?â

âIf we donât charge her, then she wonât come.â

âAnd you want her to come.â

âYes,â he snapped, and Rob grinned.

âI see,â he said thoughtfully. âShall I ring Barb, then, and tell her the five-minute dating was a success?â

âJust try it.â

âThatâs what I thought,â Rob said. âOkay, not yet. But Iâm thinking I might get Mrs. Matheson to pull out all the stops. Itâs time we had a great dinner.â

âNothing special,â Jake said.

âYou donât want to scare her?â

âRobâ¦â

âI know,â his manager said, placating. âBut Iâm thinking lobster. She can think we have it every night, because weâre not trying to impress her at all.â

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âManwillinbah Lodge.â

She turned into the driveway and she could scarcely believe she was on the same planet as the place sheâd just left. The lodge looked gracious and inviting, long and low and sprawling. Beyond rambling rose gardens were acres of grapevines, just coming into bud. It looked not where she belonged at all.

Why was she panicking?

She shouldnât be here. She should be somewhere she could be alone to think things through. Though hadnât she had enough time to think things through, and where had that got her?

But before her muddled thoughts could take her any further, her car door was tugged open, and Jake was looking in.

âHey,â he said softly. âI was starting to think Iâd need to come up the mountain and fetch you. Welcome, Tori. Welcome, Rusty.â

He was smiling. That smile was enough to make a girl panic all on its own. âI was just coming to tell youâ¦to tell Rob I wasnât coming,â she muttered. âAnd to thank you for the cleaners.â

He nodded, suppressing his smile. âThat makes sense. Or not. The cleaners were my pleasure. As for not stayingâ¦ You want to have dinner while you tell us why not?â

âI canât stay here,â she said wildly, gesturing towards the house.

âWhy ever not?â

âI donât fit.â

âYou fit in fine,â he said. âOur only two guests were burned

out themselves. Theyâre here to sleep.â

âI donât have any clothes.â

âOdd,â he said thoughtfully. âYouâd have thought Iâd have noticed no clothes.â

âYou know what I mean.â

He did. His gaze met hers and she knew he understood. âYou look great,â he said softly. âTori, you look lovely. Jeans and T-shirt are practically uniform here and no oneâs going to judge you even if they werenât. Dinnerâs on the table in an hour. That gives you time to have a bath first.â

âYouâre saying Iâm dirty?â

âIâm saying thereâs a heated spa bath on your balcony with a view to die for. Itâs totally private. If youâre dirty to start with, thereâs only you to notice. Unless you want me to come scrub your back?â

âNo!â

âNo?â He was laughing now, and suddenly she found herself smiling back. Okay, she thought, maybe this wouldnât be as bad as it seemed. She didnât need to trust. She only needed to stay for a night. And tomorrowâ¦

âWorry about right now,â Jake said gently and, chameleon-like, his laughter was gone again. It was replaced by a gentle concern she found disconcerting.

Insidious. Impossible to resist.

Inviting her to trust. Terrifying.

âOkay, no back-scrubbing,â he said, and he put out a hand to help her from the car. âNothing but bath, food, sleep, and if thatâs not what you need Iâll eat my medical degrees. Thereâs no pressure, Tori. Youâre our welcome guest.â

His hand was waiting. Just waiting. All she had to do was accept.

âI wonât bite,â he said softly. âRobâs in the house, as is our housekeeper, Mrs. Matheson. There are two elderly ladies lying on Robâs fabulous lounges on the balcony watching the cockatoos. Oneâs wearing dungarees, oneâs wearing tweed. Lifeâs safe here, Tori. Itâs a refuge, if you like. You provided refuge for your battered wild creatures. Now itâs time for you to take refuge.â

âI donât needââ

âI think you do. Barb thinks you do, too.â He hesitated but

then continued. âMaybe I should confess I phoned Barb this afternoon. When she heard your koala was dead she was all for rushing up the mountain and taking you home herself. Only I gather Barb has a husband, five sons and a menagerie. We both thought youâd be best here. So whatâs it to be, Tori? Here, or Barbâs, because no oneâs going to let you stay in a motel by yourself tonight.â

âEven if I want to?â

âIf you really want, then weâll pay for a five-star hotel in the best part of Melbourne,â he said. âAnd you neednât think Iâd have to personally payâaccording to Barb half the valley would have their hands in their pockets in a minute to help you. So whatâs it to be?â

Still his hand was held out to her.

What was it to be?

She could still drive away. She knew she could.

There was a bath inside. A bath!

And Jake.

There was the problem.

She looked up at him. He smiled.

She couldnât trust.

She didnât need to trust. This was a night in a guesthouse, nothing more.

She took a deep breath. She tried to smile back. She put her hand in his and let him pull her up.

The tug had her rising too fast. She almost overbalanced, but he had her steady, catching her shoulders, holding.

He was so near.

She should pull awayâbut didnât.

âToriâ¦â he said uncertainly, and she just looked at him. Sex on legs, she thought absently.

No. He was much, much more.

Get a grip, she thought frantically and shoved her hands up, breaking his grip. She came close to falling back down into the carâbut didnât. Thankfully. A girl had some pride.

âIâ¦ Thank you,â she muttered and managed to get herself round to the other side of the car to retrieve her cardboard box.

âI like your luggage,â he said, and grinned.

âEat your heart out, Mr. Gucci,â she said, managing a smile

in return. âThis is so next yearâs catwalk.â

âI believe it is,â he said. âIf thereâs anyone who can start a trend it would be you.â

âEnough with the compliments,â she said, feelingâ¦disconcerted. No, more than that, totally flummoxed. âYou promised me a bath.â

âI did. Let me carry your box.â

âI can manage myself,â she said with an attempt at dignity. âOnce upon a time I depended on others. I donât do that any more.â

âItâs only carrying a box,â he said mildly.

âNo,â she said softly, as she carted her belongings up the steps and into the house. âBelieve me, itâs much, much more.â

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She lay back in the vast spa; she let the bubbles float up around her and she felt as if she was floating herself. From here she could see all the way across the valley floor. There were candles lit around her, gardenia with maybe a hint of citrus. The housekeeper had lit them as sheâd settled her into the room.

âAnd donât worry about privacy,â sheâd said. âThereâs oneway glass so you can see forever but no one can see you, even if there was someone outside, which there isnât. The one-way glass is brilliant. Jake had it installed just after his father died.â

âJake did that?â

âHe wants this place to be the best. It was his stepmotherâs passion, and we want to carry it on.â

Jakeâs stepmotherâs passionâ¦ There was a lot here she didnât understand, that she hadnât thought through.

She knew this place had been built by the local doctor and his wife. Charlie McDonald had cared for this community for as long as most people remembered. Heâd cared for her mother during her long illness, allowing her to die at home surrounded by her family and her beloved animals. Tori remembered him with deep affection, and with gratitude.

Heâd lived in Combadeen and his wife had run the lodge. The place up on the ridge had been his weekend retreat, so theyâd

been weekend neighbours. But just after sheâd started university heâd retired to the city, and sheâd not heard of him until his funeral.

And nowâ¦

The old doctor was Charlie McDonald. Jake was Jake Hunter.

Illegitimate? Who knew with mixed families?

She tried to remember community gossip. There was talk of a son at his funeral. She remembered a faded baby photo on Dr. McDonaldâs surgery wall. That must be Jake.

Sheâd find out. She had all the time in the world to get it right, she thought dreamily as she sank deeper into bubbles. But then she thought, No, she was only here for a night until she organised something more permanent, and Jake himself would return to New York. Thereâd be no time for questions.

The thought left her curiously bereft.

But at least she could sleep tonight, she reminded herself. She glanced through into the bedroom, at the enormous bed piled with white-on-white eiderdowns and feather pillows. A woman could melt into a bed like this.

As opposed to melting into a man like Jake Hunter?

She was delirious. That was the only possible explanation for where her mind was taking her. She was *not* thinking of doing any melting into any man.

All she had to do to stop that was to think of Toby. Betrayal. A heartache that would never leave her.

Jake was different.

Maybe or maybe not, she thought sharply, but Jake was heading back to New York and he didnât want to even indulge in five-minute dating, much less anything else. She was tired beyond belief and her mind was playing tricks.

So get out of the bath, get to dinner, so you can go to bed.

Right. She wiggled even deeper under the bubbles.

âTori?â

Uh-oh. Jakeâs voice brought her bolt upright. âTori, are you okay?â

âIâm fine,â she managed, feelingâ¦discombobulated. She was covered in bubbles and she was bright pink. Had she locked the door? She didnât think so.

âDinnerâs ready. Iâve fed Rusty, but do you want yours here

or in the dining room?â

In here, she thought, but then maybe he had it with him. Maybe if she said the word the door would open.

âIn the dining room,â she squeaked.

âYou want a hand out of the bath?â

âNo!â

She heard him chuckle. âHey, Iâm a doctor, remember? Iâm used to human bodies.â

âYouâre not *my* doctor, and youâre not used to this one. Go away.â

âYes, maâam,â he said and there was silenceâand she pulled herself awkwardly out of the bath and thought maybe, just maybe, she should have let him in.

Maybe she even wanted to.

Maybe she was losing her mind.

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The meal was served on the terrace. Tori left Rusty on her bed, watching the doorâof courseâand made her way cautiously through the dining room and outside. And paused.

She could see the whole world.

The valley meandered downhill, following the ancient river path. Far in the distance she could see the faint, flickering lights of the city at dusk, but the foreground was simple, natural beauty.

The dusk wasnât so deep that she couldnât see vines around the house, lines and lines, reaching into the distance. Gum trees followed the riverâmassive eucalypts with wide, spreading branches. For Tori, whoâd lived with blackened skeletons for so long, the sight was enough to make her gasp.

âWe thought you might have gone down the drain.â

It was Jake, rising to greet her. As well as Jake there was Rob and two tiny, wrinkled women, smiling a welcome. One of the women had her arm in a sling. She looked pale and strained, and she held her arm as if it hurt. The other looked a little better but not much. Her forehead was badly scarred, and she was glancing nervously at her companion as if she was deeply worried about her. Fire victims both. Six months raw.

They were all six months raw.

âDo you need introductions?â Rob said easily, rising as well.

Sheâd recognised the women but was given introductions anyway. âTori, you must know Miss Glenda Parlingâpostmistress to Combadeen until fifteen years ago. And Mrs. Doreen Ryde? Doreenâs Glendaâs sister. Youâve already met Mrs. Matheson, our own personal wizard-chef, and of course you know Jake. Sit down and wrap yourself round some of Mrs. Mathesonâs cooking.â

Jake was holding her chair for her. There was nothing for her to do but sink onto the lovely upholsteryâand sink into the night.

Jake and Rob were chatting, drawing the elderly ladies out between them. They let her be, as if protecting her. The conversation had obviously been going on before she got there. She was free to take in her surroundings and the people around her. The lilt of soft music in the background. The fragrance ofâ¦more gardenias?

And then the food arrived.

For six months sheâd been living on snacks on the run. Whatever Jake and Rob planned for this place, it was obvious snacks on the run were not on the menu.

For all her life afterwards she remembered that meal.

First there were tiny garfish with slivers of lemon and curls of melting butter, cooked to perfection and leaving her mouth exploding with flavours of the sea.

Sheâd barely finished when fingers of crusty toast arrived, spread thickly with a creamy trout pate, with caviar on the side. Around the plate were tiny tomatoes, shreds of lettuce and curls of shallots. How could a salad taste of sunshine when winter was barely over? The greenhouse at the edge of the balcony gave her the clue.

The night grew more dream-like. Jake was filling her wineglass with something white and cool and luscious. She was achingly conscious of his presence, but he didnât speak to her and she didnât speak to him. Conversation was happening around her but she felt as if she was in some sort of bubble, free to be her with no intrusion.

Then came the lobster, and it took her breath away. It had to have been caught this morning, she thought. Sheâd never tasted lobster like this. She glanced up and Jake was watching her, enjoying her enjoyment. She should think of something to say,

but it was too wonderful and she left him to think what he liked and went back to cracking a claw.

Or trying to crack a claw. She was struggling. Then Jake leaned over and cracked it for her, expertly, as though heâd cracked a thousand claws in his life. He tugged the flesh free and held it out. She almost took it straight into her mouthâbut what was she thinking? Somehow she pulled back, took it in her fingers and slid it into her mouth herself. Almost decorous, but not quite.

Jake smiled and she tried to smile back and feltâ¦and feltâ¦

She didnât know what she was feeling. She wasnât making any sense to herself.

Rob was at her elbow then, asking if she wanted her wine refilled. She put her hand over her glass in a gesture of panic. Had she only had one glass? She felt dizzy. Or maybe *floating* was a better word.

They were eating by candlelight now. The night sky was full of stars and the moon was rising, vast and round. It was unseasonably warm, and the warmth was adding to her feeling that sheâd been transported to another world.

Jake was watching herâshe knew itâand that added to the floating sensation as well.

âYou canât always eat like this,â she managed as the housekeeper put a parfait of raspberries and chocolate before her. Mmm.

âJake said we were to pull out all the stops tonight,â Mrs. Matheson said.

âThough the foodâs wonderful all the time,â Glenda ventured. âThis place is fabulous. Doreen and I keep coming here, whenever we need time out, and itâs like heaven. If only we could bring Picklesâ¦â

âPickles?â

âOur cat,â Glenda said, suddenly sad, and once again Tori noticed her wince as she moved her hand. âHe was very traumatised during the fires, but heâs better now. Weâre all traumatised. We live in the relocatable village while we rebuild, but we both have health problems. When things get too much we put Pickles in the cattery and come here.â

âWhy canât you bring him?â she asked, trying to focus on something other than the food, the night, Jake. Mrs. Matheson

was setting down platters of frosted grapes and tiny chocolates, and Jake was watching her with an air of a genie producing his magic. She could reach out and touch him.â¦

No.

âWe donât welcome animals here,â Rob was telling her.

âBut Rustyâ¦â

âRustyâs a special request from the owner,â Rob said, giving Jake a rueful grin. âOld Docâs wife was allergic to dog and cat hair. The no-pet rule seemed easiest so weâve stuck with it.â

âOld Doc being your father?â she asked Jake, and he gave a curt nod as if he didnât want to go there.

But this was obviously news to Doreen and Glenda. Clearly no one had explained who Jake was until nowâmaybe thereâd been no need. Maybe he hadnât even eaten with the guests until tonight. Now they looked astounded.

âYouâre Doc McDonaldâs son?â they gasped as one, and got another curt nod.

âOh, my dearâ¦â Doreen whispered, sounding awed. âYour father? He was the most wonderful man. Oh, when our papa died nothing was too much trouble.â She hesitated then, looking puzzled. âYouâre notâ¦ He and Hazel didnâtâ¦â And then her face cleared. âI know. Youâre Dianeâs son.â

âThatâs right.â Jakeâs voice said, *Donât go there*, but Doreen had had a wonderful dinner and wonderful wine and she was past picking up subtleties.

âOh, my dear, of course you are,â Doreen said. âThelma said you were at the funeral but no one believed her. But youâre the little boy Doc lost. He broke his heart over you.â

âNot so much as youâd notice,â Jake snapped, clearly wanting to move on. âI had no contact with my father from the time I was three. I heard from him only once after my mother took me back to the States, but I was a man by then andâ¦wellâ¦even then he didnât seem keen to get to know me.â

âWell, thatâs nonsense,â Glenda snapped back, as if rising to bait. She clutched her hand and winced again, but a little pain wouldnât stop her defending a man she clearly idolised. âI was postmistress in Combadeen for forty years and I can tell you that your father wrote to you every single week, from the day your mother took you away with that awful American. Big fat letters, they were, crammed with everything he could think of. He

posted them every Friday. And you know what? Nearly every one of them came back, marked returned to sender. But he still kept sending them. Then about twenty years ago, he went over to the States. âIâm going to find him, Glenda,â he told me, but three months later he came back. He looked dreadfulâand he hadnât seen you. Your mother wouldnât let him near. Oh, that womanâ¦â

Glendaâs cheeks were pink with indignation, anger building and building. âNot that itâs any of my business,â she said, âbut to hear you say there was no contactâ¦ It makes my blood boil that your mother wouldnât let him keep in touch. But then he met Hazel. Even then, he and Hazel couldnât have children and I know he missed you every day of his life.â

There was a deathly silence round the table. Jake looked as if heâd gone into shock, Tori thought. His face was a mixture of conflicting emotions. Maybe she should reach out and touch him. Maybe she could reassure him.

Maybe she should just keep out of what was clearly not her business.

âYou said he met Hazel twenty years ago,â Jake said, tightly now, angry and disbelieving. âSurely you meant thirty. Or more.â

âOh, no, dear,â Glenda said. âThat was why they couldnât have children. Hazel was in her early forties when they met. Of course they hoped, but it didnât happen.â

âBut my mother left because of my fatherâs affair with thisâ¦Hazel.â

âNo, dear, she left because of the American. His name was Chuck or something appalling, and his automobile broke down here and he had to stay until it was mended and thenâ¦well, off he went, with your mother. And you. Your father couldnât believe it. He loved her so much. Oh, but it was never going to work. Your mother hated the life as a wife of a country doctor. She hated the calls, the feeling of everyone knowing everyone, the community. She just hatedâ¦here.â

âAre you a doctor as well?â Finally Doreen spoke. Her eyes were alight with pleasureâand with something else.

âYes.â

âOh, my dear,â Doreen breathed. âTo think, Glenda, Docâs son coming home, and a doctor as well.â And then she looked

uncertainly at her sister and then directly at Jake. âIf you really are his son, I donât supposeâ¦ You know, Glenda wonât go and see a doctor. She broke her wrist dragging me out of the fire. Since she left hospital she wonât go back, and I know it hurts her terribly. Do you think we could trouble you to look at it. Just to tell us what you think?â

âIâm not sure that I could helpâand I donât have registration to practise in this country,â Jake said, sounding flummoxed.

âNo, but you could give us advice.â

âI donât think I can.â

âIf youâre Old Docâs son you could try,â Doreen said, suddenly stern, and Tori remembered sheâd been a school-teacher. âSheâs in such pain. She hasnât slept for weeks. It hurts and hurts, and she doesnât tell me but I know she lies awake night after night. She doesnât want to go to bed because the pain takes over again. Iâm so worried about her I donât know what to do.â The sternness left her. She sniffed, and then she sniffed again and finally she hiccupped on a sob, while Glenda stared at her in horror, as if sheâd been betrayed.

âDoreen, donât.â

âHeâs Old Docâs son. Heâll help us. He even looks like his father.â

âI didnât know my father,â Jake said tightly. âYou should go back to see your own doctor.â

âThey just give her sleeping pills,â Doreen retorted, gulping back more tears. âSleeping pills and those other blue things that stop it hurting for a little bit but then her stomach gets upset and she wonât keep taking them. And the sleeping pills donât work. She canât go on like this. Neither of us can.â She touched her chest, a fleeting gesture that spoke volumes. âIt hurts us both. Please help us.â

âWe have no right to ask,â Glenda said, sounding angry and distressed.

Glenda was right, Tori thought. They had no right to ask for professional help from this man. He wasnât even qualified to practise in Australia.

But then, Tori thought of the way heâd worked with Manya, of the skills heâd shown. And he was an anaesthetist, she thought. Heâd know about pain management.

Maybe he could help.

And despite her absolute certainty that she should stay out of this, Tori found herself inexorably caught up in Doreenâs plea.

âGlenda, Jakeâs my friend,â she said softly, ignoring Jake for the moment and concentrating on Glenda. âHe helped me try and save my koala. Doreenâs right. You knew Jakeâs dad so you know him. Will you let him help? Jake, can you see if thereâs anything you can do?â

She caught the flare of shock on Jakeâs faceâbut sheâd started now. There was no way she could back off.

âJakeâs also an anaesthetist,â she told Glenda, firmly but softly. âPain relief is what he does. Isnât that right, Jake?â

âYes.â He had no choice but to agree.

âWe know you donât practise medicine in Australia,â she continued, inexorably hooking him and keeping him hooked. âBut if all Glendaâs been offered is sleeping pills and little blue pillsâ¦ Morphine?â

âYes,â Glenda said hopelessly. âBut my armâs better. They put a plate in it, and screws. Itâs as good as they can get it.â

And thenâ¦

âCan I see?â Jake said, and it was as if the whole world held its breath. *Can I see*. Those three little words had the capacity to turn this desperate little scene around.

Glenda stared at him, wide-eyed, and Jake gazed right back, not speaking, giving her time to make up her mind. The room held its collective breath.

And then, very slowly, Glenda held out her arm, and Tori wondered if Jake knew just how much trust went into that gesture.

Glenda had been postmistress in the valley forever, and her independence was legendary. When her postboys called in sick Glenda had been known to get on a bike and deliver herself, often two or three mail runs in the one day. For her to accept helpâ¦

But it seemed she was. Jake was pulling his chair round the table so he could sit facing her. Gently he took her hand in his, and while Glenda submitted her arm for inspection, while Tori watched Glenda place her trust in him, the warmth around Toriâs heart grew and grew.

She should be concentrating on Glenda. She wasâsort of. But

when heâd taken Glendaâs hand in his, it was as if heâd taken her own.

I could be in huge trouble here, she told herself, feeling dazed. I need to leave, right now. If I stay longerâ¦

But she couldnât leave now.

Jake was holding Glendaâs hand lightly in his, watching Glendaâs face intently. The tension in the elderly womanâs body was palpable. Was she expecting Jake to hurt her?

âIâm not probing,â Jake said softly. âIâm just touching.â He rested her hand in his left hand, and touched her damaged wrist with his right, running his forefinger gently up and down her arm, along her fingers, not pressing, smooth as silk.

âStop me the minute I make you feel uncomfortable or I hurt you,â he told her. âStop me the moment I make anything worse.â

She didnât stop him. He ran his fingers over the back of her palm, over and over, and then cupped her hand and felt that, too. Around her Tori felt the tension ease. Everyone, it seemed, had been holding their breaths. Even Mrs. Matheson, whoâd been clearing coffee cups, had paused, riveted.

âPress my hand,â Jake was saying. âHere. One finger at a time. Can you clench? No? Donât try, then. What does that feel like?â

âLike my hand doesnât belong to me,â Glenda whispered. âLike itâs not thereâonly it is. I can feel it but not like I want to feel it. Sometimes it hurts so much I just want to chop it off. Itâs not mine any more. Itâs not real.â

âIt is real.â

âIâm being stupid,â Glenda said, as finally Jake rested her hand in his again and let it lie.

âNo.â It was such a flat response that Glenda stared. âYouâre not being stupid. How long have you been putting up with pain like this?â

âA while.â

âMonths,â Doreen said dully. âAnd itâs getting worse.â

âBut at the beginning it did seem to get better?â

âYes,â Glenda whispered. âThatâs why itâs stupid. It got better and all the scans are good and the doctors say Iâm cured. Only then the pain startedâ¦â

âIâve seen this before,â Jake said. He was still holding her

hand in his, so gently he couldnât possibly be hurting.

âIâm thinking this is something called complex regional pain syndrome,â he said, and it was as if he was alone with Glendaâeveryone else had disappeared. âEverything fits. Youâve had major trauma. So many of the bones and blood vessels and nerves were damaged that often a physical recovery masks more complex nerve problems. The symptoms often occur months after the injury itself. Your hand feels cold and there are areas of sensory blunting. It feels strange and stiff, like it doesnât quite belong to you. And then thereâs the pain. You protect it to stop it hurting, and the more you protect it, the worse it gets. Your fingers are already starting to curl. Itâs hard to make them move.â

âI donât want to move them,â Glenda whispered. âBut itâs only my hand. I was so luckyâ¦ Iâm better.â

âYouâre not better. You have nerve damage that needs to be addressed,â Jake said sternly, and Glenda blinked and looked at him with something akin to hope.

âThe doctors say thereâs nothing they can do.â

âThat might be because youâve been talking to surgeons,â Jake said. âAnd no, thereâs nothing more surgeons can do. Now itâs time to move to another specialty.â

âLike you?â

âSomeone like me. I canât prescribe in this countryâIâm not registered. But Iâm happy to write a note for you to take to your family doctor, asking that you be sent to a pain specialist.â

âMore morphine?â

âMorphineâs not great for this type of pain,â Jake said. âWhat you need is a drug specifically targeting nerve pain, and there are good ones. My guess is that we can give you immediate relief the moment we get you a nerve-specific drug. If you agree, first thing tomorrow we can find out who knows who in this valley and get you on something that will help.â

âI know people,â Tori offered, and Jake sent her a smile that made her feel even more dazed.

âThere you go, then. First cab off the rank is our local vet. They say there are six levels of connection between you and anyone else in the world. Iâm thinking Tori will do it in two.â And then, as Glenda looked at him in disbelief, he touched her cheek, a huge gesture, Tori thought, for someone who seemed to

hold himself so aloof.

âItâs okay,â he told her. âThe nerve-specific pain relievers are easy on the tummy, and itâs not like youâll need them forever. You also need a hand therapist, and you need her urgently as well, if that hand isnât to turn into a claw. You think you might be able to find us one of those, Tori?â

âDadâs old vet nurse has a daughter whoâs a hand therapist,â Tori said, absurdly pleased. âShe works in the same clinic as the doctor I use.â

âThere you are, then,â Jake said. âBut firstâ¦letâs pack that hand in heat before you go to bed. Weâll pack it in hot-water bottles, or heat packs if Robâs got them. Weâll give you some of that morphineâyes, it has side effects, but Iâm thinking this is the last time youâll take itâand then youâll sleep. Thatâs an order.â

And he said it so sternly that, to Toriâs astonishment, Glenda giggled.

âYes, Doctor,â she said.

âThatâs what I like,â he said. âAn obedient patient.â

âThank you,â Doreen breathed, and Tori looked from Jake to Glenda and then back to Jake and she thought, I am in such trouble.

Do not trust?

How could she not?

She didnât have a choice. Concentrate on work, she thought suddenly, fiercely. Jake was being kind because he was a doctor. Maybe she should think of a way she could be useful, too.

âRob, tomorrow you and I need to talk about your pet policy,â she ventured, as Glenda glowed at her and then glowed back at Jake. She looked as if she might be as smitten as Tori was feeling. âIf youâre giving fire victims time out, what they most need is the people and pets they love. Are you allergic to cats, Jake?â

âNo, butâ¦â

âBut what?â

âBut nothing,â he told her and shrugged and smiled. âThere donât seem to be many buts right now.â

Where was the aloof man sheâd met at five-minute dating? He was unbending by the minute.

âYou organise it,â he said. âTell Rob what he needs to do and

heâll do it. What youâre capable ofâ¦are you sure youâre just a vet?â

âIâm just a vet,â she said, a trifle unsteadily, but Jakeâs smile was making her feel as if she didnât know what she was any more.

Do not trust.

âIf youâll excuse me,â she said unsteadily, âIâm really very tired and Rusty will be waiting. Goodnight, all.â

And because the night really was getting blurryâbecause she didnât understand how the expression on Jakeâs face was making her feelâshe rose and fled, just as fast as her dignity allowed her.

CHAPTER FIVE

EXHAUSTION took care of the first part of the night. It almost always did. But despite the wonderful meal, the fabulous bed and the feeling of being nurtured, the demons were never far away. Tori woke as sheâd done for the past six months, at three in the morning, to stare wide-eyed into the dark. Remembering a darkness sheâd never forget.

Rusty had gone to sleep on her bed. Now, however, he was where he always was at this time of the morning, with his nose hard against the door, waiting for someone to come home.

âItâs time we both stopped waiting for them,â she told him, but he whimpered and pawed the door and she rose to let him out, to show him that no one was on the other side of the door.

Rusty had been one of a pack. Maybe she should get a new pup, she thought. Maybe thatâd help. Somewhere, sometime, sheâd read that a measure of a life well lived was how many good dogs could be fitted in. As a vet and dog lover since childhood, she accepted that for a fundamental truth. But stillâ¦ To take that last step and move onâ¦

She wasnât ready and she wasnât sure Rusty was either.

She walked out onto the verandah and gazed up at the mountains looming above. The moon was vast and full, turning the night into a sepia version of daylight, with the blackened landscape softened, disguised.

Rusty nosed her ankle and whimpered.

âWe shouldnât be off the ridge,â she whispered, stooping to hug him. âIt feels wrong.â

It wasnât wrong. She had to start her new life. Tomorrow?

But maybe sheâd come down too quickly. Right now it felt as if sheâd forgotten something very important.

âMaybe we need to say goodbye,â she whispered. âCome on, Rusty, we can do this. Do this and move on.â

She slipped back into her room and tugged on jeans and

windcheater, then headed out again, her little dog at her heels. She didnât go out through the house, though. She didnât want to wake the household, so she slipped out onto the verandah, down through the rose garden, around the corner of the house to the car parkâand she barrelled straight into Jake coming in the opposite direction.

For a moment all her breath was pushed out of her. Shock left her speechless. Jake had caught her, steadied her by her shoulders, looked quizzically down at her. Then, as Rusty whimpered, he squatted and patted the little dog under the ear.

âHey, itâs okay,â he told him. âIâm a friend.â

Rusty nuzzled his hand and moved closer to Jakeâs ankle. Which was surprising all by itself, Tori thought, feeling breathless. Rusty hadnât responded to anyone since his masterâs death.

âAre you running away?â Jake asked mildly, looking up at her in polite enquiry. âArenât you supposed to have a pole with a bandana slung over your shoulder? I donât think running awayâs proper without them.â

âWeâre not going far,â she managed, struggling to make her voice work. âWhy are you up?â

âI couldnât sleep,â he said simply. âI had a whole lot of my preconceptions stood on their head at dinner. Itâs taking a bit of getting my head around.â

âLike, your father loved you?â

âThereâs a way to go before Iâll believe that,âhe said, and his smile faded. âWords are easy. But youâ¦Youâre going where?â

âUp to the ridge.â

âYou forgot something?â Heâd straightened. His gaze held hers, serious, compassionate.

âIâ¦ Yes.â

âDo you want company?â

âI donâtâ¦â She faltered. Say no, her head screamed. But there was something about this night. There was something about this man.

âWe left too fast,â she whispered. âTomorrow Rusty and I will move onâwe need to. Weâll start a new life. But for six months weâve simply been putting one foot in front of another, over and over, and in Rustyâs case weâve even lost a foot doing

it. I thoughtâ¦ Tonight I wanted to just sayâ¦â

She faltered but his gaze didnât waver. He took her hands. âOf course you do,â he said softly. âCan I drive you?â

âI donâtââ

âIf you donât want company, then Iâll wait here for you to come back,â he said. âIf you need to be alone, then I understandâof course I do. Iâll sit here and wait, and see if I can get rid of my own demons, and if you donât come back by dawn, then Iâll come up to the ridge and demand the ghosts give you back. You belong in the real world, Tori. Tonight the real world will look out for you. Iâll look out for you.â

And she knew that he would. Trust? There was that word again, raising its ugly head, but the night was still and beautiful and Jake was watching her with a look that was nonjudgemental, nonpossessive or needy. It was simplyâ¦caring?

The sensation was insidious in its sweetness and there was no way in the wide world she could resist.

âThen yes, please,â she whispered, stupid or not. âIâd love it if you would come with me.

Â

So they headed up to the ridge, with Jake driving and Rusty cradled on Toriâs knee. Only instead of glancing out the window all the time, as Rusty always did, the little dog kept glancing across at Jake.

As did Tori. She didnât understand what she was feeling. She mistrusted the instinct that had her accepting his company, but for now Jakeâs presence was warm and solid and real, and strangely it made what she wanted to do feel even more right.

They drove past Jakeâs darkened farmhouse, the hub of so much activity over the past six months, and that felt strange. Then they turned into the drive of what once had been her home and that felt worse.

Even the night couldnât disguise the destruction. Blackened fence posts, massive trees, felled and not yet cleared, a gaping void in the blackened bushland where the house had once been.

A chimney rising out of the ashes like a lone sentinel, a monument to what had happened.

âI canât begin to imagine what it must have been like,â Jake

murmured, and Tori shook her head, tears not far away. What was it with this man? She hadnât cried for six months. How could she cry now?

âI was in the valley,â she whispered. âI couldnât get back. The whole mountain was on fire. I was going out of my mind. Everyone with people we love up here was going out of their minds. It took three days before we could get back. Three daysâ¦â

He didnât respond, just looked steadily out at the ruins, and she knew by his silence that he could see how it must have been.

She climbed out of the car, and he didnât follow as she made her way carefully over the ruins. Jake knew instinctively that she didnât want him to follow. Rusty came with her, limping by her side, but he had the right. This had been home for both of them.

Home.

If she could turn back timeâ¦

If only she hadnât trusted.

She picked her way across the rubble to the chimney stack. The fireplace was almost intact. A few bricks at the corner had fallen when a roof beam had dropped across the mantelâthatâs how Rusty had lost his leg.

She placed her fingers on the ledge above the fire cavity. Thereâd been a wooden mantel resting here, and on it an ancient clock that never kept time, pictures of her parents on their wedding day, pictures of Tori and Micki as kids, her graduation photo, Micki at some glamorous, want-to-be-model shoot.

This hearth had been the heart of their home, and in the end this small fireplace had succeeded in saving one little dog. One small thread to connect her past to her future.

At least Micki and her father had thought she was coming, she thought bleakly, letting herself think back as she so seldom allowed herself to do. That was the only thing that kept her saneâthat last, frantic call from Micki.

âTori, the fireâs on this side of the ridge.â

âIâve rung emergency services,â sheâd said, as she pushed her van past the speed limit, heading into smoke so thick she knew sheâd have trouble getting through. âThe fire trucks are on their way. Iâm on my way. Stay cool.â

Stay cool. It had been their farewell line for ever, between two sisters and taken up as a joke by their father.

Sheâd said it then, with love; her sister had laughed, and she knew her father and Micki had died knowing she was moving heaven and earth to get to them.

And suddenly it was okay. Their ghosts were here now. She could feel them, a soft and gentle presence. It was right to come tonight, she thought.

Sheâd loved her family more than life itself, and they were still with her, in this place. Rusty was by her side, pressing against her, a link to them. She knelt and fondled him.

âWe can go on,â she whispered. âI canât forgive Toby, but maybeâ¦maybe I can forgive myself for trusting him. Dad and Micki trusted him, too. They wouldnât want me to beat myself up forever.â

Jake was waiting. Life was waiting. The night was still and warm, and the moonâs gentle beams were almost a blessing.

It was time to go.

She straightened and turned. Jake was at the edge of the clearing, watching gravely from the shadows.

âIâm all right,â she said, managing a smile. âIâm not about to wail or rend my garments.â

âIâm pleased to hear it.â

âThank you for coming.â

âIt was my honour,â he said gravely, and it was so much the right thing to say that she caught her breath. She picked her way back over the ruins but he met her halfway, catching her hands as she stumbled and helping her the last few steps.

âOkay?â he asked softly, and she managed a smile and a sniff, and if she left her hand in his, then who could blame her?

âIt was so lovely here,â she whispered. âI canât tell you. My mum and dad, my sister, our friends, our dogs, chooksâ¦â

âChooks?â

âHens. All sorts. My dad bred Rhode Island Reds. They spent their lives clucking around the orchard. Can I show you the orchard?â

She didnât wait for an answer, but led him around the pile of rubble to a stand of small trees behind the house site. The fruit trees stood out from the trees heâd been seeing over and over up here on the ridge, for they werenât burned. They were a mass of blossom in the moonlight, on a bed of deep, green grass.

âThe orchardâs deciduous,â she said simply. âNot native.

They were so green in the summer that they didnât burn. The grass under them was dry and it burned but the trees themselves didnât catch. So now we have cherry blossom, and apple blossom, and peach. Micki and I had a big log swing hanging on the peach. One day Iâll hang that swing again.â Her voice faltered. âI hope.â

âYouâd want to live here again?â

âItâs my community,â she said simply. âMy home. Rusty thinks so, too.â

But Rusty wasnât looking around him. He was pressed against Jakeâs leg. He was forming a new allegiance, Tori thought.

Confused, she pulled away a little, and walked further into the orchard. A low-hanging cherry branch brushed her hair and blossoms drifted around her. She put her fingers out and caught them, and suddenly she found herself smiling. Rusty had limped over to the base of the oldest treeâthe peach. The grass here was thickest. He wriggled down, burrowing his nose in the long grass, and gave a sigh of pure contentment.

It felt good. More, it felt great. For the first time in six months she felt free. The ghosts of her family were all around her, a gentle, loving presence that would do nothing to hold her back.

And Jake was here. Suddenly it seemed right that he was.

âYouâre beautiful,â Jake said softly, wonderingly, and she smiled at him and shook the branch a little, letting loose another cascade.

âBeautifulâs how I feel right now,â she said simply. âThank you.â

âThereâs nothing to thank me for.â He stepped closer and plucked blossom from her hair. âYouâre facing your demons all by yourself.â

âNo,â she said gravely. âHow can I? Donât you know that all by yourself is a really bad idea. I sense youâre a loner, Jake Hunter, but loneliness isnât for now. Not for tonight.â

And then, because she didnât know whyâthe night, the warmth, the smell of blossom, the sight of Rusty wriggling contentedly in the grass that was once his favourite place, the feel of this manâs hand brushing her cheek as he lifted blossoms awayâfor some a reason she would never understand, she stood on her tiptoes and she kissed him.

Loneliness isnât for now.â¦

For Jake, too, this day had been huge. Heâd come to this country to put his property on the market and depart, cutting the links to a father he held in dislike, even contempt.

But things had changed. His view of the past, taught to him by a bitter woman, had been challenged by an unbiased witness and had been found wanting.

There were emotions in his head that matched Toriâs, and now Toriâs tragedy was layered on top of his. He couldnât figure out what he was feeling.

But he didnât have to figure it out. Tori was doing it for him. Her mouth was on his, her body was pressed against him, and all he could feel was her sweetness, her gentleness, the beauty of this night.

He wanted her.

And as if sheâd read his thoughtsâ¦

âI want you,â she whispered.

His hands tightened involuntarily on her waist and he was pulling her against him with a hold that was entirely proprietary, entirely sure of what he wanted. Tori.

Quite simply she was the most beautiful woman heâd ever met. She was in battered jeans and trainers, an ancient windcheater; her curls were all over the place, her eyes were huge in her too pale face.

She was gorgeous and he wanted her.

This was some sort of magnetic attraction heâd never met before, some primitive link, some compulsion he didnât fully understand.

Who was he kidding? He did understand it. He wanted her, as simple as that. Something tonight had pulled him to her in a way he didnât understand, but he wasnât questioning it. It was the way her hands held his, the way she looked up at him in the moonlight, the way she tugged him closer, closer, so he could no longer see her face, so all he could do was feel the beating of her heart.

They both knew where this was going. They both knew how right this moment was. Butâ¦

âI donât have a condom on me,â he said, in a voice so hoarse

he hardly recognised it. âWe canâtââ

âIâm protected from pregnancy,â she managed, breathless. âSoâ¦unless weâre talking multiple partners, weâre okay. Toby and Iâ¦we tested.â

âIâm safe,â he growled, but sense prevailed enough for him to haul away from her long enough to rake his fingers through his hair. Knowing he should put her away from him. Knowing he must. âTori, you donât know me. You shouldnât trust me. You shouldnât want to.â

âI know. Itâs crazy, stupid, risky, crazyâ¦â

âYou already said crazy.â

âThat means itâs double crazy.â

âSo we stop? We go sensibly back to the lodge?â He said it trying to keep his voice flat, inflexionless, as though she ought to agree to the sensible option. He was giving her the sensible option.

But who wanted to be sensible? Not Tori.

Sensible was for tomorrow.

She took a deep breath, her eyes not leaving his. She tugged her ancient windcheater up and over her head and she tossed it aside.

Her figure was perfectâand more.

Her bra was beautiful, made of exquisite lace, so white it was almost luminous in the moonlight. Her breasts were framed by the sweetly curving lace; they were soft mounds of perfection and they took his breath away. All of her took his breath away.

Sheâd kicked off her shoes. Now she pushed the zip and stepped out of her jeans as if it was the most natural movement in the world.

Her panties matched her bra.

Heâd forgotten how to breathe.

âNot all the welfare bins held hand-me-downs,â she said, totally unselfconscious, grinning at the look on his face. âA gorgeous Swiss lingerie company sent a care box. You like?â

Did he like? He was speechless. She was standing barefoot on the grass under the blossom tree, smiling up at him, all imp, in the most beautiful lingerie heâd ever seen. In the most beautiful body heâd ever seen. The contrast to the woman heâd metâhow many hours ago?âwas stunning.

âYouâre beautiful,â he said, and it was totally inadequate.

âMy undies are beautiful,â she corrected him, and he tilted her chin and gazed straight into her eyes and he shook his head.

âYouâre beautiful,â he repeated, so strongly she had to believe him. âBut thisâ¦ Are you sure? Tori, I want you tonight, I want you more than Iâve ever wanted anything in this lifetime. But I do need to go back to the Statesâ¦â

âYour medicineâs in the States,â she whispered, and she met his gaze directly, clear and true. Knowing, as he did, that this was far too soon for any decision to be made as to a future. âThis is no five-minute date, Jake, but neither is it any kind of commitment. This is seduction, need, call it what you will, but itâs for tonight. Itâs your need and mine, for tonight and tonight only.

âI trust you,â she said steadilyâand she knew she was right. For this night, trust had returned with a vengeance. She thought suddenly of Jakeâs father, of the elderly doctor sheâd known and loved, and she knew that no matter how little heâd known him, Jake truly was his son.

Jakeâ¦ A stranger, yet not.

Here, now, he was hers.

âIâm as sure as anything Iâve ever known,â she whispered. âMy body wants you. I want you.â And she fumbled with the catch to her bra.

But he was before her, unfastening the clasp, then cupping her breasts, caressing, holding, teasing her nipples, sending fire surging through her body, blocking out all else.

This was so right. This wasâ¦now.

Crazy but right. Stupid but wonderful.

Perfect for now.

Her body was on fire.

Not crazy. Not stupid.

Perfect.

He was touching each nipple in turn with his lips, reverent, wondering, and she arched back, hot with want. It felt so good, so wonderful, to be lifted out of the past six months, to feel the grey fading away like some forgotten nightmare.

Her body was surging to his touch, a bud unfurling in a blast of heat, coming to life in ways sheâd never felt before.

Jake.

She should be embarrassed. She should at least be a little self-conscious.

She felt nothing but right. His gaze told her she was beautiful and for tonight she believed that message absolutely.

âI believe things are a little unequal,â she managed, and somehow she unfastened his shirt, button by button, a slow, inexorable path of exploration, while he kissed her lips, her breasts, the nape of her neck, trailing kisses downwards while she tried to concentrate on undressing him. His shirt was gone, his belt, his chinos, and then, finally, he was kicking them aside and all his clothes had disappeared. Her skin met his as he tugged her close, closer, her body curved into his and fell onto the bed of soft, lush grass.

They gasped as one as the coolness of the grass met their bodies. They were clinging to each other for warmth, for heat, waiting for the loving to take over and for the cool of the night to disappear.

As it did. As it must.

She wanted him. She ached for him as he kissed her, deeply, searchingly, wonderfully, as his fingers explored every contour of her body, as her breasts moulded to him, as their heartbeats synchronised.

She wanted him, wanted him, wanted himâ¦.

Skin against skin, full-length, she had him all. *He was hers.*

She was riding his body, mounting him, holding him hard under her. She was aching, aching.

âTori,â he whispered, and then he groaned and then there was no space for words at all. For finally, searingly, wondrously, he was a part of her. His rhythm was her rhythm, his body was her bodyâskin merging into skin, body merging into body, and the night was dissolving in a haze of heat and want and pure, wondrous delight.

She loved. For tonight, she even trusted. For tonight, this was her man.

CHAPTER SIX

Somewhere towards dawn they made their way back to the lodge. Jake drove. Tori sort ofâ¦wafted. She felt beautiful. She felt cherished. More.

She felt as if her world had transformedâlike the grey had shifted and the sun was shining through. It marked an end of the dreariness, she thought, and as Jake refused to let her walk but carried her from the car to the houseâand that meant carrying Rusty as well because she wasnât letting him goâshe felt as if sheâd moved to another life.

The dawn was beginning to glimmer over the mountains. When the household woke, life would begin again.

Life on the other sideâ¦

âYouâre smiling like the cat that got the cream,â he murmured, as he climbed the verandah steps and her smile broadened.

âI believe I am. I believe I did.â

âToriâ¦â

âNo.â She reached up and touched his lips. âNot a word. Nothing. That was justâ¦perfect. It woke me up. It was like life started again. I donât know if you can understand.â¦â

âAll I understand is that youâre beautiful. Can I carry you to my bedroom?â

âNo,â she whispered. âI donât want to wake up beside you.â

Something shuttered in his faceâan expression she didnât like. Pain? No. It was a closing of something that had barely started to open.

âJake, no,â she said, swiftlyâshe did *not* want to hurt this man but this was important. She was struggling to explain it, struggling to understand it herself, but somehow she had to find words for what she was feeling. âWhat happened tonight was magic, time out of frame. I needed it so muchâI needed youâand Iâll be grateful for the rest of my life. But if I wake up beside you

in the morningâ¦â

âIt is morning.â

âYou know what I mean. If I wake up beside you, then I might hold and cling. I might even get needy. I donât want that. I donât want anything to mess with what we had tonight.â

I donât want to fall in love.

Where had that come from? No matter, it was there, hovering between them as if both had thought it. Who knew what Jake was thinking, but she felt it, knew it, and accepted that it was to be feared.

Loveâ¦ After one night? She didnât think so.

She knew she had to move on. Somehow Jake seemed to have given her the strength to do just that, and she would not mess with it.

âI loved tonight,â she whispered. âTonight I loved you. But we both know our worlds donât fit together. Letâs just accept tonightâs magic and move on.â

âIâm not sure I can.â He was pushing open the door to her bedroom with his foot. âTo leave you hereâ¦â

âItâs what I want.â Was it? No, part of her was screaming, but the rest of her was sensible and it had to be sensible for all of her.

âYouâre soâ¦â

âAnd so are you.â And then she paused. They both paused.

Toriâs room was right at the end of the house. The room next to hers was Doreenâs. From the other side of the wall came the muffled sound of terror. Whimpering, sobs of fear. Real pain.

They couldnât ignore it. Neither of them could. Tori slid down from Jakeâs arms and slipped Rusty onto the bed, but before sheâd straightened Jake was heading out the door.

She reached him before he reached Doreenâs door, tugging him back.

âLet me. She knows me.â She knocked. âDoreen, itâs Tori. Can I come in?â

âIâ¦ No. Oh, my dear, did I wake you?â It was a breathless gasp. âIâm so sorry.â

For answer Tori opened the door a sliver. Jake was beside her, but she motioned him to stay where he was. She slipped in, but she left the door open, just a little, so Jake could hear.

âDoreen, whatâs wrong?â she asked, and then, as her eyes

grew accustomed to the dim light and she made out the figure huddled among the vast nest of pillows, her heart wrenched. She was with her in a heartbeat, gathering the elderly woman to her, simply holding.

âOh, my dear, donât tell Glenda,â Doreen gasped.

Jake stayed outside, silent as a panther. She couldnât hear him, but she knew he was there, waiting to see if he was needed.

âYou mustnât tell Glenda,â Doreen gasped again. âSheâs asleep at last. Itâs just angina. Nothing. It hurts and I wake up and you know how the night terrors take over.â

Of course she did. Night terrors must surely be reality for every person whoâd been on the ridge that day, Tori thought. But as she held her, as she felt her thin frame shake, she thought this was more than nightmares. And maybe more than angina, too? Her hands were cold and sweaty and she could feel her tremors. She put her fingers on her neck, finding her carotid pulse. It was fast, erratic, frightening.

âDoreen, Iâm not sure this is just angina,â she said, trying to keep her voice steady, not wanting to put fear into the equation as well. âI think we should get this checked. Can I call an ambulance?â

âNo!â

âAt least let me call Jake.â

âNo,â Doreen whispered, but she said it much less forcefullyâand then she stopped breathing.

One minute she was sitting on the edge of her bed, half supported by Tori. The next she simply swayed backwards, falling onto her pillows, unconscious.

Toriâs fingers had been on her neck, feeling her pulse. Her hand followed her downâand there was no longer a pulse.

Doreen had said not to call Jake. That was five seconds ago. This was now.

âJake,â she yelled at the top of her lungs. âJake, I need you *now*.â

He was with her before sheâd stopped yelling. She was still searching for a pulse, but with her other hand she was hauling Doreenâs legs back onto the bed, shoving away the bedclothes that were half covering her.

âShe said angina. I think nowâ¦cardiac arrest. No pulse.â

Jake was on the other side of the bed, like her, searching for

a pulse, then hauling pillows away, lying her flat, checking her airway.

âBreathe for her,â Jake snapped, and took the neckline of Doreenâs flannelette nightgown and ripped it to the waist. His big hands rested on Doreenâs chest for a moment, steadied, then moved rhythmically into cardiac massage. âBreathe,â he snapped at her again. âTip her head back, hold her nose and fill her lungs with your breath. Twice. Then I pump. Come on, Tori.â¦â

She needed no third bidding. She breathed while Jake took a short break from chest compressions. Fifteen pumps per minute, down, down, down, while Tori breathed and prayed and breathed and prayed and breathed and prayed.

They needed an ambulance, defibrillator, oxygen, adrenaline, but there was no time, no space, to call for help. If they didnât get Doreen back now, no amount of equipment or expertise would help her.

No more deaths. Please, no. Not Doreen.

Breathe and pray. Breathe and pray.

âDonât panic,â Jake said softly and he must have sensed rather than felt her surge of despair. âSteady, Tori, slow and steady, donât stop breathing until youâve seen her chest rise.â He wasnât altering his rhythm. Down, down, down, over and over, over and over.

How long now? Please, pleaseâ¦

âEarly days,â Jake said. âTwo minutes, no longer. Big breaths, Tori, deeper, Iâm going harder.â

He did, and she heard the unmistakable sound of a rib cracking. She winced but kept on breathing, kept on breathing. Another crack. And thenâ¦

A ragged, heaving gasp, so harsh it caught them both by surprise. Doreenâs whole body shuddered. Tori drew back a little, hardly believing, but Doreen dragged in another breath and then another.

Life.

Jake was hauling her onto her side, clearing her mouth again, supporting her, making sure she didnât gag, choke, while Tori sat back on her heels and stared and felt sick to the stomach. And then suddenlyâ¦not sick.

She could hear Doreen breathe.

Itsy bitsy spider, climbed up the waterspoutâ¦

Where had that come from? It was weird little song, a childâs tune from her past, and suddenly as she watched Jake work, as she waited to see that she was no longer needed, that she was free to go for help, the song was in her head. Her mother had taught it to her. She remembered sitting on her motherâs bed singing it. And then after her motherâs funeral, she remembered her father bringing home two puppies, one for her and one for Micki.

âIâm calling him Itsy,â sheâd told her father, and Micki had called her puppy Bitsy. She thought suddenly, crazily and totally inappropriately, if Doreen lived, then she wanted another dog and she wanted to call him Itsy. It was part of her prayer.

Doreenâs breathing was steadying. Tori was grinning like a fool, and Jakeâs smile was almost as wide as hers.

But he wasnât relaxing yet. His smile was there but it was intent, and his attention was totally fixed on Doreen. He was moving on, she thought, totally concentrated on medical need. She, however, could back away a little. With Doreenâs breathing settling they could risk Tori leaving for a moment.

âCall the ambulance,â Jake said. âYou have mobile cardiac units here?â

âMICAs, yes. Mobile intensive-care ambulances.â

âThatâs what I want and I want them here yesterday. Then wake Rob. I want the first-aid kit he keeps. We have oxygen. Move, Tori.

She moved. She might be a vet and not a doctor but she didnât have to be a doctor to know the situation was still grave. Something had stopped the flow of blood to Doreenâs heart, and that something was still not resolved.

âSee if Rob has dissolvable aspirin,â Jake snapped, and then as Doreenâs eyes widened, focused, his tone changed. He sat down on the bed beside her and he took her hand in his.

âHey, Doreen, youâve given us all one hell of a fright,â he told her, as Tori headed for the door. âYou passed out on us. Iâm supposed to be an anaesthetist, not a cardiologist. And Iâm not supposed to practise medicine in Australia. Are you trying to get me into trouble?â

He was wonderful, Tori thought dreamily. She fled.

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When the ambulance arrived it came complete with its own paramedical team. They moved swiftly and efficiently, and Tori and the now wide-awake Rob were no longer needed. And Doreen still wouldnât let them wake Glenda.

âShe hasnât slept for weeks,â she whispered. âI checked on her before I went to bed and she was sleeping like a baby. Please donât wake her. I donât need anyone to go with me.â

âIâll go with you,â Tori said.

âI donât need anyone.â

âOf course you do.â Tori smiled down at her, the events of the night making her feel spacey and happy and floaty. Nothing would happen now. Jake had saved Doreen. And somehowâ¦somehow it felt as if Jake had saved *her*. The leaden weight that had hung around her heart for six long months had lifted.

She glanced down as something brushed against her leg and it was Rusty, but he wasnât brushing against her. He was simply positioning himself so he could press more closely against Jake.

You and me both, she thought mistily, and then Doreenâs hand reached out and took Jakeâs and she thought, You and me, three?

âCould you come with me?â Doreen whispered to Jake, and the force sheâd used to forbid them to wake Glenda was gone. She sounded frail again, and frightened. âYouâre Old Docâs son.â

âIâmââ

âThatâs a really good idea,â Rob said, sounding relieved. âItâd be great if she had a doctor go with her.â In case she arrests again. It was unspoken but definitely implied.

And for reasons of her own, Doreen agreed. âOld Docâs son,â Doreen whispered. âCombadeen has its doctor back.â Her hold on Jake tightened. âItâs so good to have you home.â

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Who could sleep after that? The ambulance left, with Doreen and Jake aboard. Despite Robâs protestations Tori sat on the verandah and watched the dawn. Rusty was watching the road again, but things had changed. Who he was watching for had

changed.

âThereâs no use changing your allegiance in that direction,â she told him. âBut as a transitional tool heâs very useful.â

The only problem was, Jake didnât seem like a transitional tool. He felt permanent.

But, of course, he wasnât.

When sheâd run into him tonight heâd been shocked to the core, thrown out of kilter by what heâd heard about his father. He had a lot of thinking ahead of him.

Sheâd seen his face as heâd followed Doreen to the ambulance. There was no choice in what he had to do. Heâd care for the old lady, heâd do his best, but he was thrown.

What had Doreen said? Heâd come home.

He was a long way from home.

She was sitting outside Glendaâs bedroom. The French windows were open, and when finally she heard her stir she went in to tell her what had happened. To her surprise Glenda seemed almost relieved.

âI knew something was wrong. Iâve been so worried, but all sheâd do was worry about me. I had to pull her out of the fire. I was sure sheâd collapsed and it wasnât from the smoke but everyone was so busyâ¦ They just treated the burns.â She sat up in bed and nursed her bad wrist and she looked almost happy. âAnd Old Docâs son is with her. Jake. Jakeâs home. Iâm sure sheâll be fine.â

She had breakfast, refusing to be worried, her faith in Jake absolute. When Rob offered to take her to the hospital, to relieve Jake, to bring him home, she accepted with pleasure.

They leftâand finally Tori went back to bed.

Jakeâs home?

It didnât make any sense at all, but it kept playing, and she slept with it in her head.

Jakeâs home.

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It was midday before Jake drove Robâs car back to the lodge.

Doreen had been transferred to the large teaching hospital in the cityâwithout Glenda accompanying her. Stubborn and Independent R Us, described the two sisters, Jake thought wryly.

They worried about each other and not themselves. Thus, âYou stay here and get that hand seen to,â Doreen ordered Glenda as she was wheeled away to the waiting ambulance on her way to get a cardiac stent.

Rob offered to stay on with Glenda. He had things to do in town and was happy to wait, if Jake came back later in the afternoon to pick them both up. That should have left Jake free to return to the lodge, but the Combadeen hospital was short-staffed, and once sheâd heard the story of Glendaâs hand, once Glenda told her what Jake did for a living, the local doctor grabbed him and held.

âIf youâre an anaesthetist Iâd like some solid advice,â she said, so firmly he had nowhere to go. âI canât get Glenda into see a specialist before the end of the month, yet I canât have her in this level of pain until then. If sheâd told meâ¦â

It seemed she hadnât. Discharged from hospital, Glenda had made perfunctory follow-up visits to the city outpatients and then had simply ceased complaining.

âNeuropathic painâs horrible,â Dr. Susie Fulton said gently to Glenda, still fixing Jake with a gimlet eye. He wasnât escaping on her watch. âBut anaesthetists are better at diagnosing it than family doctors. So can you bear Dr. Hunter examining you fully, so he can tell us what he thinks is going on? That way I can care for you until we get you some specialist help.â

âJake *is* specialist help,â Glenda said stoutly. âHeâs Dr. McDonaldâs son.â

âCharlie McDonald?â The plump little country doctor straightened and beamed. âCharlieâs son? Oh, my dear, have you come home?â

âNo,â Jake said shortly. âThis is not my home.â

But as he examined Glenda with a lot more care than heâd done the night before, as he gave solid advice, and then finally as he drove back to the lodge, the phrase kept playing in his head.

Had he come home?

Of course he hadnât. This could never be home.

Why not?

It didnât make any kind of sense. This was the place his mother hated.

âThe walls closed in on me in that place,â sheâd told him.

âEveryone knew everyone elseâs business. You couldnât get away. Your father was everyoneâs best friend. Everyone thought he was their own property. Everyone thought I was their property. Itâs claustrophobicâpeople clutching you, needing you, you canât imagine.â

He could imagine. Doreen had clutched him, and as soon as Glenda arrived at the hospital sheâd done her own clutching. Then the local doctor. Even Robâ¦

âGreat that you were here,â heâd said. âYou know, if you were to consider staying, this valley needs doctors more than it needs rain.â

It was as though he was being hammered. Too much had happened too fast. And on top of the myriad emotions he was feeling towards a family he felt he no longer knew, heâd made love to a woman whoâd twisted his heart.

Was it only two days ago that heâd met her?

Disturbed, and tired beyond bearing, he pulled the car over to the verge and closed his eyes. He desperately needed to sleep. A power nap would keep him going, and itâd also clear his mind. Heâd used this technique often during his career, when things were closing in on him, seemingly too difficult. Heâd simply stop, clear his mind of everything, sleep a little and, when things percolated back, the white noise would be gone and only the urgent issues would stay.

He lay back in the car seat, letting everything fade. Maybe he slept for a little. When he opened his eyes a flock of white cockatoos had landed in the paddock beside the car. They were screeching and wheeling like something in an Alfred Hitchcock movie.

And yes, things were clearer.

No matter the pressures mounting on him, he didnât belong here. No matter that it had been his fatherâs home, it wasnât his home. The screeching of these unfamiliar birds cemented it.

But Toriâ¦

Tori was different. The thought of her was front and centre in his mind, still right where sheâd been when heâd gone to sleep. She was one special woman.

The white noise was the claustrophobia of this environment, of the needs of this valley. That had to be removed. It had nothing to do with him. Tori was separate.

Maybe they couldnât be separated.

Well, if notâ¦ He had no place here. His life, his work, his future were in Manhattan. The past two days had changed nothing.

Except he might have fallen very hard for a woman called Tori.

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Tori rang the hospital as soon as she woke. âThings are fine,â Susie told her. âDoreenâs already in Melbourne North Western. Sheâs seen a cardiologist and theyâre putting a stent in later this afternoon. It seems a relatively straightforward block and amazingly there looks to be little long-term damage. He thinks sheâll be fine. Glendaâs still here. Jake told me your suggestion about the hand therapist, and sheâs with her now. Jakeâs lovely, by the way. Glenda says he was your five-minute date. How about that?â

She blushed. Nothing was secret in this valley.

âHeâs nothing to do with me.â

âNo, dear, but if you could have him be something to do with you Iâd very much appreciate it,â Susie said briskly. âThe valley needs someone like him so much, and his fatherâs reputation has gone before him. People would trust him.â

âHe lives in the States.â

âHe has houses here,â Susie pointed out. âSo if you could think of any way to make him stayâ¦â

âSuseâ¦â

âJust saying,â Susie said and laughed. âIs he home with you now?â

âNo.â

âHe should be soon, then. Robâs got a couple of things to do in town. The arrangement is that Jakeâll bring back the car at five and pick up Rob and Glenda, so that gives you a whole lot of time all by yourselves. So see what you can do, my dear. Iâve been advertising for a partner for years. If you can do it with one five-minute date Iâll be very pleased indeed.â

She chuckled and disconnected. Tori stared at her phone as if it was poison.

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The valley gossips had been at it already.

No one knew about last night. All they knew was that sheâd walked out of a five-minute date, and she was sharing a house with Jake. Yet alreadyâ¦ Alreadyâ¦

She felt her cheeks flush. Jake would hate it. She hated it.

She would not have last night sullied by gossip.

So move on, she told herself. Move on fast. Jake was on his way home. She needed to be out of here.

Make another phone call.

âYes, of course,â she was told by a women whose sympathy was matched with the efficiency of six monthsâ post-bushfire organisation. âYouâve been almost the last one left living up on the ridge. Thereâre three homes left in our relocatable village. You can take your pick.â

Feeling more and more panicked, Tori decided she could sort her gear later. She gathered Rusty and headed out the drive.

She turned out the stone entranceâand almost hit Jake coming in.

She stopped. It was only courteous. She had to say goodbye.

Sheâd made love to this man. What had she been thinking?

She knew exactly what sheâd been thinking.

He climbed out of the car and she was caught again by how good he looked. Yes, his pants were creased and when she looked closely there were a couple of grass stains on his shirt. He needed a shave. His hair needed a brush.

He looked incredibly hot.

He climbed out and smiled at her and hot didnât begin to describe it. He made her heart turn over.

âWhere are you going?â he asked, peering in her passenger-side window and Rusty practically turned himself inside out in order to reach him. Tori pressed the window button, the window slid down and Rusty was in Jakeâs arms in a flash. Jake submitted to being licked, and even laughed as the little dog squirmed his ecstasy in finding his friend.

His friend. Her friend. This man was seriously, seriously sexy.

âIâm going to see my new home,â she said, frantically attempting to firm something inside her that felt very much in need of firming.

âCan I come with you?â

Could he come? Um, no. Um, not wise.

But Rusty was licking his nose again, he was laughing and what was her head doing, saying no? Of course he could come. She could no sooner deny this man than fly.

âOf course,â she said, and he opened the door and climbed in. Uh-oh. Where was her escape plan now?

âYou donât have anything else to do?â she asked, half hopeful.

âI need to be back at the hospital at five to collect Rob and Glenda. Thatâs four hours.â

âYou donât need to sleep?â

âIâve slept.â

âYouâve slept?â

âFor at least an hour. Any more is for wusses,â

âRight,â she said, thoroughly disconcerted, and restarted the engine and headed down the valley to her new home. With her man beside her.

Her man who wasnât her man. A Manhattan doctor.

Jake.

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The relocatables were set up as a village. From a distance they looked like rows of shoeboxes lined up side by side.

Even from the road Tori could see there was no use checking out the three sheâd been offered and choosing between them. Theyâd be exactly the same.

âWhat is this place?â Jake demanded, staring around in dismay.

âHome,â Tori said resolutely, heading for Shoebox 86. The key was in the door. She pushed it open and bit back a gasp of dismay.

Home?

Not.

Sheâd need to make it home fast, she thought, or the resolution sheâd decided on would fail her. Somehow what had happened last night had seemed the catalyst for moving on, but nowâ¦ Staying near Jake any longer seemed dangerous. This was the sensible option.

But this was *beige*. And Jake was still here.

Soâ¦ Sheâd use him again, she thought. Sheâd use his energy.

âWe need to shop,â she said briskly, but Jake wasnât listening.

âYou canât stay here. Itâs like a budget motel.â

âItâs better than a budget motel,â she snapped. âItâs new and itâs comfortable and itâs mine.â

âSo what will you do here?â

âIâve been offered a job in a pet clinic on the outskirts of the city.â

âWas that what you were doing on the ridge?â

âMy father and I ran a horse clinic,â she said, âwith a small-animal practice on the side. There were scores of horse studs on the mountain. Thereâs not a lot of horses up there now, though, and there wonât be for years, so itâs pets only.â A furrow appeared between her eyes and she shrugged. âNo matter. Last night showed me I can move on and I will.â

She was looking around, taking careful assessment. âBut youâre right, I canât live here like it is now,â she said. âI need to go shopping.â She glanced at her watch, hesitating. âI should have come alone, but we have time before youâve promised to pick up Glenda. If I wait until after then I wonât have stuff today, and I need this place to be cheerful tonight.â

âYouâre not staying here tonight?â

âI am,â she said, flatly and definitely, and then she smiled, taking the sting from her words. âTodayâs the first day of the rest of my life. Do you want to come shopping?â

Did he?

âThereâsâ

âTime,â she said, refusing to be deflected by his dismay. âThereâs a great Asian trading centre a couple of miles from here. I reckon I could get all I need there and more.â

He stared at her, stunned. The difference between the Tori of now and the Tori of yesterday was, quite simply, extraordinary. What had happened between them last night had shaken his world, but for Tori it seemed to have marked a turnaround, transforming her from grief-stricken victim to woman about to embark on her new life.

âWe should have brought the two cars,â she said, but cheerfully, as if she wasnât very sorry. âYouâre welcome to stay here and wait. Or are you happy to watch me shop?â

She smiled and there was determination behind the smile. She might be transformed, he thought, but the grief was still with her. She was moving forwards, with shadows.

And the least he could do was come along for the ride.

âShoppingâs my favourite thing,â he lied.

âReally?â

âNo, but itâs like hard work. I can watch it being done for hours.â

She chuckled, a lovely rich chuckle that had the power to transform this stark little apartment into something else. Toriâs home.

Bleak as a great manâs house without a fireplace in it.â¦

The words came fromâ¦where? He hardly recalled the analogy, so why should they spring to mind now, dredged from literature or a play heâd once seen?

But he knew why theyâd come. A house without Tori in it seemed the same. Unthinkable. She had the power to light from within, and thatâs just what she was doing as she grabbed her bag and jingled her car keys.

âRustyâs due for a nap. I bought him a doggy chew so heâll be happy enough staying here. You want to drive or will I?â

âI will,â he said faintly. âI kind of like the challenge of driving on the leftâand you should save your energy for shopping.â

CHAPTER SEVEN

So shop she did, while he stood back and watched in something akin to awe. She shopped with professional purpose.

Quilts, cushions, rugs, curtains, blankets, jugs, vases, wall hangingsâ¦ There was little hesitation; she simply saw an item, beamed, picked it up, stuck it in her trolley, and when her trolley was full she used his arms instead.

âYouâre not leaving much timeâor roomâfor milk and bread,â he managed, muffled under rugs, and she balanced another rug on top and steered him towards the door.

âI can get milk and bread after weâve taken Rob and Glenda home.â

âYouâre definitely leaving the lodge tonight?â he asked, and she started unloading onto the register and tried to locate her purse among pillows.

âOf course,â she said absently. âThatâs what this is about. I need to get my own place but I donât want to live with beige. Itâs only one step better than grey, and Iâm not going there ever again.â

âItâd be good if you stayed at the lodge a bit longer,â he said diffidently, but sheâd handed over her money, her hands were free and she could respond now with her full attention. She turned and faced him square on, frivolity gone.

âGood for whom?â

âYou need to rest.â

âI wouldnât rest if I went back to the lodge. We both know that. Not with you around.â

The cashier, a bored teenager with lavender spiked hair, looked suddenly less bored.

âWell, maybe lack of rest has its advantages,â he ventured, fighting an adolescent urge to blushâbut Tori shook her head.

âAny more than one night and I might get the wrong idea. No strings, Jake. You donât seriously want them, do you?â

âIâ¦â How had they got here, so fast. âNo.â Was there any other possible response?

âThere you go, then.â She was piling stuff back into his arms, tucking a pillow under his chin. âPress down or weâll have pillows all over the car park. Can you manage?â

âYes, of course.

âThen weâre finished,â she said. âLetâs go.â

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Conversation finished. She steered the talk onto inanities while they drove back to her new home and unloaded.

Heâd never seen colour used to such effect. Within fifteen minutes the drab little relocatable had become home. Outside it was still a shoebox but inside it was the sort of shoebox a man might walk into and smile, because it looked exactly what his vision of Toriâs home should be.

Even Rusty approved. Heâd been staring dolefully at the door when they arrived, lying on the beige carpet. Now he was snuggled between two crimson and sky-blue cushions, with a purple throw-rug wrapped snugly around his injured lower half. He looked approving, Jake thought.

He approved as well.

âItâll take me a while to organise the curtains,â Tori said, glowering at the beige Venetian blinds. âThese might give us privacy but if anyone thinks Iâm looking at them for more than a night they have another think coming. Nowâ¦â She glanced at her watch. âHalf an hour. I need flowers.â

âFlowers?â

âThereâs a flower farm half a mile from here. You want to come?â

Watch Tori buy flowers or stay here and wait? Of course he wanted to come.

Rusty decided to come this time, so he drove them both to the flower farm and she bought half a dozen daffodils and then two dozen tulips and then about a hundred gerberas in about three minutes, and then she decreed she was finished.

The word sounded too stark. *Finished.*

She had such courage, he thought, as they loaded the car and set off again. She was amazing. And more and more the thought of her staying in that sterile little relocatableâdespite her

additionsâwas almost unbearable.

But her face was set, determined, as though sheâd made a decision and nothing was about to deflect her. She felt his glance and met his gaze and smiled, but he knew the smile was an effort.

He was leaving for New York. He couldnât help her. Even if he could, thatâd mean getting involvedâand he didnât do involved.

Did he?

Lots of things had to be thought through, he mused, fighting confusion. But in the meantime there should be something he could do. There must be some way he could help her.

And suddenly there was. They were driving past a farm gate, and a sign, roughly scrawled on a piece of tin propped against the mailbox, made him take his foot off the accelerator. Then, as the idea took hold, he braked, pulled the car onto the verge and stopped.

âUm, why are we stopping?â she demanded.

âWeâve forgotten something both you and Rusty need.â He was backing into the driveway and finally she saw the sign.

Golden Retriever Puppies. Ten Weeks Old.

âWe donâtâå she gasped.

âYes, you do,â he said, and somehow he knew enough of this woman to realise his gut instinct was right. âYou had four dogs. You and Rusty have had six months by yourselves, and thatâs long enough. I have colleagues with dogs and I know how big a part of their lives they are. And Iâve met golden retrievers. They smile. You live in a place where pets are welcomeâyes, I saw the signâso why not?â

Then, as he saw her face, a mixture of distress and despair, he cut the engine, tilted her chin with his finger and said, âTori, you need something warm and alive and new, something not scarred by whatâs gone before. If Rusty hates itâ¦if you hate it, then okay, but I do want you to think about it.â

She still looked distressed. He hesitated, unsure what to say, unsure what his feelings were. Last night this woman had moved him as no one had ever done. If he had longerâ¦ If it was possible, maybe sheâd even penetrate the armour heâd built up around himself.

But for now, he couldnât leave her like this. Despite the colour and the flowers, he couldnât leave her in her strange little relocatable. Relocatableâ¦ Even the name seemed wrong.

This woman needed a home. Home was a strange concept for Jake, whoâd always regarded home as where he could crash with least effort, but there was something about Tori that said home was much more.

âLast night changed things,â he said softly. âThey say men can take sex as it comes, and maybe theyâre right, most of the time, but theyâre not talking about what we had last night. Itâs bound me to you in some way I canât begin to figure. It made me feel like part of you is part of me. Whether thatâs dumb or not, thatâs the way you make me feel. Our lives donât connect. Not now. Not yet. But I canât walk away and leave you and Rusty without something of me.â

He glanced again at the sign. Maybe this was a cop-out, he thought, but for now it was all he could do. Anything else scared him stupid. âSo can I buy you and Rusty a puppy?â he asked again. âFrom me to you.â

âSo we get to hug a puppy in the middle of the night instead of you,â she whispered, in a voice that wasnât quite steady.

âInstead of nothing,â he said, and he heard bleakness but he couldnât help it. He hesitated, and then, because it seemed right, he kissed her, gently on the lips, and forced a smile. âThough you can pretend itâs me if you like. I hear golden retrievers make great tongue kissers.â

âEww!â

He grinned. The distress on her face faded and the tension between them lessened a little. The kiss seemed to have made things better. It had made them seemâ¦friends as well as lovers?

Friends *instead* of lovers.

Tori was smiling a little now, but she was chewing her bottom lip, looking at the sign, looking at him, looking at the sign again. Focusing on a puppy.

It was no small thing, he thought, to lose three beloved dogs and then to move forwards.

âShould I call him Jake?â she asked, and he blinked.

âJake.â

âBig and warm and a bit shaggy.â

âHey!â

âIt fits.â

âI donât believe Iâm shaggy.â

âYou could be,â she said. âIf you loosened up a little. If you forgot to be a Manhattan millionaire.â

âIâm not!â

âRob says you are.â

âRob talks too much. Iâm justââ

âA doctor doing his best,â she said, laughter fading. âAnd your best has been wonderful. You saved Doreenâs life last night. In a way, youâve saved Glendaâs. Youâre wonderful.â

The depth of sincerity in her voice was unmistakable. *Youâre wonderful.* Heâd never been given such a complimentâby such a woman. And suddenly the light kiss heâd just given her was no longer enough. He desperately wanted to kiss her againâonly this time deeply and longâbut she was looking at the sign again, and there was a furrow between her eyes that told him her focus was no longer on him.

He had to back off.

âI guessâ¦â she said slowly. âIâm not working yet. Itâd be a good time to get a pup. And it could really help Rusty.â

Okay, forget the kiss. Concentrate on what was important. âItâd be a great time to get a pup, and Iâd love to buy one for you.â

âIâd pay,â she said quickly.

âNo,â he said, and he tugged her round to face him again. âManhattan millionaire, Tori. My gift.â

She smiled, a little bit wobbly but a smile for all that. âIf heâs from a Manhattan millionaire, then he should have a diamond-studded collar.â

âHeâd think it was girlie.â

âThen,â she said, her smile widening as she climbed out of the car, âletâs see if they have a girl. Jake might need to become Jackie. A golden retriever who doesnât sniff at diamonds. Jake or Jackie. Letâs see what they have.â

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She didnât choose a Jake. She chose a female and she chose a runt. Or Rusty chose a runt and Tori agreed.

He might have known. There were six pups as big as one

another, as energetic as one another, as healthy as one another. There was one bigger than the rest, a male who obviously spent his life trying to round up his litter mates, growing more and more exasperated as his siblings didnât do what he wanted. And then there was a tiny female who tried gamely to join into the family romp and got knocked over every time. Rusty went straight to her, nose to tail, tail to nose, and they started, tentatively, to play.

âWe nearly put her down,â the breeder told them, as Tori scooped up the pup in one hand and Rusty in another. âMy husband wanted toâsheâs such a runtâonly she kept on fighting for her place at a teat and she has such courage that I couldnât bear to. But sheâs not right,â she confessed as Tori snuggled her under her chin. âHer left ear is weird. It sort of sticks up when itâs supposed to flop. And her tailâs supposed to be long and feathery and I can tell already that itâs not. The older sheâs getting the worse itâs looking. If you want her, sheâs cheap.â

Neither of them was thinking of money. Jake watched Tori snuggle the little girl to her; he watched her with two dogs in her arms, and he felt great. This was going to work.

Then he got distracted. The biggest pup had been tearing round in circles. He had his litter mates rounded up, but then one of his sisters made a break for it. He darted after her, the others scattered and he had to start the whole process again. He practically beamed as he proceeded to bounce around the circle again.

He didnât know dogs. His mother had hated them, and now he spent his life at work. A dog was out of the question. But he watched Tori cuddle her two and he thoughtâ¦ He thoughtâ¦

âWould you like two pups?â he asked her. âI think the round-up guyâs great.â

Toriâs arms were full of wriggly dog. For a runt the little one had plenty of bounce, and Rusty was wriggling, too. They were practically turning inside out to reach each other.

âTwo,â Tori gasped. âAre you trying to drown me?â She sank onto the floor and was pounced on by a sea of pups. âOh, Jake, I shouldnât even think about one.â

She was half laughing, half crying. This was a huge thing for her, Jake thought, as he watched her hug armloads of pups.

Sheâd lost three dogs in the most dreadful of circumstances, and sheâd lost so much more. For her now to move onâ¦ To learn to love againâ¦

âIt feels like a betrayal,â she whispered but she hugged her runt closer.

âGrief has to let you go sometime,â Jake said softly. âWhat did Auden say? Stop all the clocks? They did stop for you, Tori, but now they need to start again. Nothing is worth stopping the clocks for the rest of your life. And if that means loving againâ¦â

âSays the man who doesnât do loving.â

âHow didââ

âI can guess,â she whispered, smiling up at him through tears. âIâm guessing your parents stuffed you so badly youâve never got over it. So why donât you get a pup?â

âI work fourteen hours a day,â he said shortly. âI can hardly leave one of these guys in a corner of the operating room while I work.â

âI guess you canât,â she said sadly, but then a tiny smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. âAs opposed to me. Iâm a vet. I could take these guys to work. I could manage two dogs.â

âNot three?â He was still eyeing the round-up king, circler extraordinaire.

âCan you imagine that guy in my shoebox?â she demanded, following his gaze. âMy yardâs the size of a pocket handkerchief. Even oneâs stupid. Maybe I shouldnâtâ¦â

Okay, he needed to focus. Forget the round-up king, he told himself, and he crouched among the puppies so he was right in front of her.

âIt would be my pleasure to buy one of these pups for you,â he said. âPlease let me.â

Her gaze met his. Her eyes were glimmering with unshed tears, but she was trying to smile.

âA birthday gift?â

âWhenâs your birthday?â he demanded, stunned.

âToday.â

âYouâre kidding!â

âSort of,â she admitted. âBut thatâs what it feels like. My birthday. Like yesterday was one life and todayâs the beginning of another. Jake, last nightâ¦â

The breeder was watching, a big, broad woman in wellingtons and overalls, waiting for them to make a decision on the puppies. This was hardly the time to talk about last night. Butâ¦

âLast night was great,â he told her. âAnd tonightâ¦â

âNot tonight,â she said, fast. Her puppy wriggled to get down. She released him and the king immediately took it as a personal affront that his huddle of pups had been interfered with. He yapped and started circling again.

âJake, last night was last night,â she said. âIt was the most wonderful gift. Itâs just made me feel alive again, like thereâs life still to come. So nowâ¦ As you said, itâs time to start the clocks again. So yes, Jake, Iâd love you to buy me a birthday gift. My lopsided puppy. Itsy, I think, after a song my mother taught me.â

âItsy bitsy spider?â he asked, bemused.

âThatâs the one.â

âMy guy could be Bitsy.â

âNice try,â she said and grinned and lifted up her puppy and held her, only this time it was almost as a shield. âOne pup. No more.â

There were so many conflicting emotions in his head he didnât know where to start. Business, he thought, and he grabbed his wallet and made a play of finding his credit card. For suddenly he couldnât look at her. This woman with her arms full of pup. This woman whose life had been destroyed and was now starting againâwhile he went back to Manhattan. He need never see her again, he thought, and he felt suddenly, unutterably bleak.

Which was nonsense. He didnât do relationships, and he surely didnât do relationships with vets who lived on the far side of the world to him.

And he didnât do relationships with women he might just end up falling in love with.

But he looked at the play of emotions on her face as Itsy licked and licked. He looked at the errant curl that had escaped the knot sheâd tied. Last night those curls had been down. Heâd run his fingers through them. Soft as silkâ¦

He wanted her.

âYou want her or not?â the breeder demanded.

The dog. She was talking about the dog.

âI think we do,â he said, still watching Tori. âDonât you, love?â She blinked. âLove?â

âFigure of speech,â he said hastily. âDonât you, umâ¦â

âTori,â she said and smiled, and it was as if she could read his thoughts. âDr. Nicholls.â Her smile held the memory of the night before. It was the smile of a woman whoâd taken her man, who knew what he was.â¦

Her man?

He belonged in New York, he thought, trying desperately to ground himself.

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Remember relationships, he told himself. They never last. His mother had drilled it into him over and over until it was almost a mantra. âDepend on yourself and only yourself. You fall in love and you start being stupid.â

Only his mother had lied. If sheâd lied about his father, what else had she lied about?

But maybe in this she was right. Stupid would be taking Tori into his arms right now, and holding her, andâ¦

And what? Carrying her back to New York? He surely couldnât see Tori in his sleek Manhattan apartment. Sheâd have to walk Itsy in Central Park.

Heâd known her for, what, two days? So maybe in this at least his mother was right. You fall in love and you start being stupid.

He concentrated on payment. He felt Tori look at him for a long moment, and then she turned her attention back to Itsy.

Bitsy was chewing his shoelaces. He glanced down at the little dog and he thought Bitsy was the stupid side of him as well.

The breeder scooped him up and put him back into the pen. Bitsy looked out through the bars as if heâd just been put in solitary confinement.

âWill he sell?â He couldnât help asking.

âOh, yeah,â the breeder said confidently. âHeâs the best of the litter. Iâm thinking, though, that Iâll keep him myself for stud. Look at those bonesâ¦â

Bones? All he could see was eyes, looking out through the

bars as if heâd personally betrayed him.

He glanced at Tori, who was also looking wistfully at Bitsyâwhile clutching Itsy and Rusty.

âI canât,â she whispered.

She couldnât. He could see that. They had to get out of here before they had the whole litter.

âJust Itsy,â he said.

âJust Itsy,â Tori whispered. âTwo is enough.â

Two dogs?

That was what she meant. She had her house now. She had her dogs. Sheâd start a new job, a new lifeâ¦and heâd go back to New York.

What was wrong with that?

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They made a fast visit to a pet shop to buy Itsy supplies. Then they headed back to the shoebox to drop off the flowers. They also did two medical consultations. It seemed that word had already spread that Dr. Nicholls had moved into Shoebox Mansions. They arrived back to find a border collie with a grass seed in its paw, and a corgi with flatulence, dogs and owners waiting patiently at her front door.

To Jakeâs surprise Tori took it in her strideâin fact, she even seemed pleased. While Rusty and Itsy explored their miniscule backyard Tori sat on the doorstep and turned into a vet again. While Jake and the owner held the big, docile collie still, she carefully tweezed out a cruel-looking hayseed. She cleaned the paw and disinfected it.

She then told the corgiâs owner where to buy charcoal tablets, and to add a little yoghurt to her meals. Both owners went away happy.

âYouâll be inundated,â Jake said, thinking of his mother; of the way sheâd hated patientsâ demands.

âI like it,â she said simply. âIt makes me feel like I belong.â

He thought of his work; of the careful distance he kept. He worked long hours, but to have someone approach him out of context, a neighbour, someone in his gymâ¦

This wasnât his world.

Tori wasnât his world, he thought. But how could he leave

her?

Maybe he couldnât.

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It was a bit after five before they arrived back at the hospital to pick up Rob and Glenda.

âWeâre a wee bit late,â Tori said, starting to apologise, but then Glenda spotted Itsy and no apologies were necessary.

Glenda was beaming. The new painkillers were obviously working. The tight lines of pain around her eyes had eased and, even though she was still cradling her arm, there was a huge sense of relief about her. Doreen had gone through the surgery with flying colours. The cardiologist had spoken to her and had been completely reassuring and Rob had promised to take her to see her tonight.

âAnd the hand therapist is wonderful,â she told them. âHe didnât do very muchâhe says I need really good pain control first and heâs only going to work within the limits of what doesnât hurtâbut he massaged really gently and I did tiny exercises, and already itâs feeling better. Heâs given me a sheet of exercises to do at home, but Iâm to come here every day because he says if we hadnât caught it now there might be long-term loss of function.â

There might already be a little, Jake thought, but he watched Glendaâs shining eyes and thought a little loss of function would be nothing now that the pain was relieved.

âSo weâre both going to be okay,â Glenda said happily. âBut Dr. Fulton says we have to persuade you to stay here. She says anaesthetists make great pain specialists, and this valley needs a pain specialist so badly and if youâre anything like your father youâd be wonderful. She says thereâre so many burns victims with long-term problems, long-term pain, that we all need you.â

And suddenly they were all looking at him. Glenda, Rob, Toriâ¦even Rusty and Itsy.

âNo,â he said, really fast, and Glendaâs face fell. Toriâs face didnât change, but he thought he saw the smallest quiver.â¦

Donât go there.

âWe need to get back to the lodge,â he said, still too fast, and Glenda took the hint and turned her attention back to Itsy.

âIs Itsy coming to stay?â

âIâm only coming back to get my car,â Tori told them. âIâve moved into my new house. Itsy and Rusty and I need to go home.â

Home. There was that word again.

âOh, my dear, thatâs a shame,â Glenda said, throwing Jake a reproachful lookâas if somehow he could have persuaded her to stay but had chosen not to. âOh, and Itsy would have made the lodge much more fun.â

âWhereâs your cat?â Tori asked her. âPickles?â

âIn the cattery on James Street,â Glenda said. âButââ

âThen letâs go spring him and take him back with us.â Tori grinned happily at them all. âRob says the rule is no animals but Iâm thinking heâs the manager and Jakeâs the owner. Jake, your stepmother set the lodge up as an indulgence for the wealthy. Thatâs gone out the window. What it needs now is to be a place people can come to recover. If I were you Iâd think about pushing that aspect hard. Even when the fireâs forgotten thereâll always be people who need an interim place, between hospital and home. Pets are the first thing. Rob could make individual runs attached to the bedrooms. Guests can contain their own pet as much as they like, but still take it for runs or cuddle it in bed at night.â She hugged Itsy and Rusty. âLike I do. Itâll be great.â

And there it was again, that queer lurch he didnât know what to do with.

âOh, if we could keep our catâ¦â Glenda said, while he tried to figure what exactly he was feeling.

âAnd you know what else? You could organise medical visits,â Tori said, and she was speaking directly to him now. âMaybe you could set up treatment rooms so you could have visiting doctors, physiotherapists, hand therapists, counsellors, anyone you need.â

âYouâre talking staff,â Jake said, trying to focus on business when he just wanted to focus on Tori.

âYou can afford it,â she said blithely and grinned. âI chose a very cheap pup.â

âYou did.â He was distracted, but his mind was on what sheâd said. Manwillinbah Lodge as a health resort?

He looked at Glenda and he thought, It could work.

Maybe Rob would enjoy the challenge.

Maybe heâd enjoy the challenge, he thought fleetingly, but he stomped on that thought almost before it had a chance to reach the surface.

âMaybe,â he said, trying to sound dampening, but neither Tori nor Glenda would be dampened.

âItâll be lovely,â Glenda said, smiling and smiling. âDoreen and I will come and stay all the time.â

âHe hasnât said we can take Pickles yet,â Rob reminded her

âAre you allergic to cats?â Glenda asked, suddenly frowning. âLike your stepmother?â

He knew nothing about his stepmother. âIâm not allergic,â he said shortly.

âDo you like cats?â

âYes, butââ

âThen thereâs no problem,â Rob said.

âYou could buy a cat,â Tori told him, and they all looked at her. She coloured a little but held her ground. âHeâ¦ Jake said he couldnât buy a puppy because he works fourteen hours a day.â

âDo you, dear?â Glenda demanded. âThatâs far too long.â

âYes, but he could still have a cat,â Tori said patiently. âOr better still, two cats. Cats are fiercely independent but theyâre still there when you get home at night.â

âYou need someone,â Glenda said, and glanced at Tori, who was still colouring, and amended her statement. âI meanâ¦something.â

âI think I know someone with a litter of kittens,â Tori said.

âNo!â

âNo?â Tori said cautiously, and he thought he heard laughter behind her tentative query.

âIf I want a cat I can get one in New York.â

âYes, but will you?â

âNo.â

âNo?â

âI donât have room in my life for anything.â

âOr anyone?â Glenda said, forgetting to be innocent, and she was looking from Tori to Jake and back again.

âNo,â Jake said, steadier this time, and firmer. âAnd Mrs. Matheson will have dinner on. We need to get back.â And he

swung himself into the driverâs seat without another word.

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She sat in the passenger seat holding her dogs, while Jake concentrated on driving. Rob and Glenda were chatting in the back seat. Jake was staring straight ahead and she thought there were things in this manâs past that were hurting now.

Sheâd noticed the way heâd watched the crazy little male pup as he did his round-ups. Heâd lookedâ¦hungry. She saw the same expression when he glanced at her. As if he was looking at something he wanted but couldnât have.

Fair enough, she thought. She felt a bit the same. Or, okay, she felt a lot the same.

They collected Pickles from the cattery. The ancient tabby purred with pleasure when Glenda collected him. He eyed the dogs with weary indifference through the bars of his cat cage, as if to say, If this is what I have to put up with to be free, then so be it.

But Toriâs dogs werenât staying with Pickles at the lodge. She was taking them back to the relocatable tonight. Her new home.

She had an almost irresistible urge to stay at the lodge one more night, but she glanced across at Jakeâs set face and she thought, No, one more night would be one night too many.

Maybe last night had been one night too manyâbut then neither of them had planned it. It had just happened, a primeval need that had shocked them both.

Mrs. Matheson was on the verandah. She walked down to meet them and added her voice to the chorus urging her to stay.

âNo,â she said, sounding ungracious, suddenly close to tears. She thrust the dogs into Jakeâs arms and disappeared inside to fetch her possessions. When she came back out Glenda and Mrs. Matheson and Rob had gone. There was only Jake, leaning against her car. He was holding Itsy, and Rusty was at his feet.

He didnât look like a millionaire, she thought inconsequentially. He looked a bit rumpled, casual, nice.

Jake.

She had to go.

She thrust her stuff into the trunk and lifted Itsy from Jakeâs arms before she got teary. She put the dogs in the crate in the back seat, and she was right to leave.

She was ready to walk away.

âJakeâ¦thank you,â she whispered, holding out her hand in an absurdly formal gesture of farewellâbut suddenly she couldnât say anything more because he had her in his arms and he was kissing her, in a crazy way, in a way that said he wanted her, he needed her, she was his woman.

This had nothing to do with reality, she thought wildly, but she let herself be kissed. Of course she let herself be kissed.

And kissed and kissed.

This was still about last night. It was about the letting down of barriersâthe beginning of her new life.

It had nothing to do with her wanting this man.

She couldnât want him. *She couldnât.*

But for just a moment, well, maybe for just several moments, she surrendered to him, and she felt her body light from within. She felt beautiful. She felt wanted. Jake was kissing her, holding her, her breasts were moulding to his chest, her feet were hardly touching the groundâand she felt all woman.

And when finally he let her go, when finally he put her away from him and held her at armâs length, she felt as if her world was shifting.

She felt breathless and bruisedâ¦and like she couldnât bear to walk away.

And it seemed that neither could he. âCome to Manhattan with me,â he said, and her world didnât just shift; it threatened to roll right over.

âCome to Manhattan?â

âTori, this thing between usâ¦â

âWhatâ¦thing?â

âThe thing that says I want you,â he said simply.

Simple? There was nothing simple about this. What was he asking? She stared up at him, dazed beyond belief.

âTori, I donât understand this,â he said softly, tugging her close again, kissing her hair. âIâve never felt like this. Iâve never expected to feel like this. But nowâ¦ Iâm due to start work back in Manhattan next week and how can I leave? How can I walk away from you?â

âI guessâ¦you donât have to leave,â she whispered, trying to make sense of what he was saying. âYou own two houses here.â

âThis is my fatherâs world, not my world,â he said, and

suddenly he sounded more sure of his ground. He sounded forceful, determined, even a little angry that she could make such a suggestion. âIâm an anaesthetist in a large teaching hospital. Iâm good at what I do. Iâve worked hard to get there. But you and Iâ¦â

âYou and I.â She said the words slowly. âYou and I? Thereâs a âweâ? Jake, you donât have room in your life for a puppy. Yet you ask meâ¦â

âPlenty of doctors have wives.â

Wives. The word hung between them. It felt like a threat, Tori thought, suddenly bleak beyond description. *Plenty of doctors have wives.*

Was he asking her to marry him? What a thought. What a way to bring it up if he was.

âSoâ¦these doctorâs wivesâ¦they donât need big yards?â

His brow snapped downwards. âWhat theâ¦ Thatâs not what Iâm saying.â

âSo what are you saying? Youâre asking me to marry you?â

âI donât know,â he said explosively. âI hadnât even thought of marriage. But the way you make me feelâ¦ You just do something to me.â

âYouâre saying itâs my fault?â

âIâm not talking about fault.â

âNo,â she said bleakly. âBut you donât want this. To feel like this.â

âI canât pretend. I never intended toâ¦â

âOf course you didnât, and I wonât be proposed to against your better judgement,â she said, suddenly angry. âTo be slotted into your life in the few minutes youâre home between work and sleep? In a place where thereâs no one I love? How can you ask that of me?â

âWe could take Itsy and Rusty back with us. We could get a larger apartment.â He raked his hair and she thought, He really hasnât thought this through. He hadnât even known he was going to ask her to join him until the words were out of his mouth. Now he was trying to figure out how he could make it work. âWe could make arrangements,â he said.

âI donât want to make arrangements,â she snapped. Anger had arrived now, coming to her aid in a red hot mist. He thought

he was attracted to her, so heâd take her home, like a puppy from a pet shop, without even doing the groundwork. *Plenty of doctors have wives.* What sort of statement was that?

âIâd take up space in your life, Jake Hunter, and you donât have space to give,â she told him, knowing she was right, even if it hurt like crazy to say it. âMy community is here. My work is here. My life is here. Itâs not sitting in some drab New York apartment waiting for you to get home at night.â

âItâs not drab.â

âWhat colour is it?â

âGrey, butââ

âI rest my case.â

âTori, this is stupid.â

âIt is, isnât it,â she said, and suddenly, inexplicably, the anger died. For somehow she knew where he was coming from. He was as confused as she was, and as blown away by the unexpectedness of it. âI know,â she said, much more mildly. âYouâre feeling about me the way Iâm feeling about you, like we have something special. But honestly, we donât. We had aâ¦a frisson. Like a lightning bolt or something that shocked us and made us think we were special. Only you know what happens after lightning hits? You run in case it hits again. You donât want to be a part of my life, Jake, and I canât think I could possibly be part of yours. So letâs just get over it.â

There was a long silence while anger dissipated. While sense prevailed.

âIf thatâs what you wantâ¦â he said at last.

Itâs not what I want, she thought. But what did she want?

She wanted him to sweep her into his arms and carry her off into some magical happy ever afterâonly he didnât even have a yard for a dog. Where was the happy ever after in that?

âWe need to say goodbye,â she said, struggling with her dignity, and Jake looked down into her eyes for a long, long moment and then finally he nodded.

âWe do.â

Her anger was completely gone now. This was Jake, the man sheâd loved last night. The man she could still love. The man she might even learn to trust. Anger was gone, but sadness took its place. Regret that a different time, a different place, could have worked.

âGoodbye,â he said softly, and she thought, I will not cry, I will not.

But then he smiled down at her and suddenly she didnât want to cry. She tilted her chin and met his gaze square on. This wasnât about loss. This wasnât about grief. It couldnât be.

Jake had been a watershed, a magical, romantic way to start her new life. Heâd been her knight in shining armour, she thought mistily, and while the thought remained she stood on tiptoes and kissed him, lightly this time, and gently.

âMy Lancelot.â

âLancelot?â He sounded confused.

âYou were my white knight, right when I needed you most.â

âA white knight,â he said, sounding revolted, and she grinned.

âOnly for two days,â she said. âWhile I played damsel in distress. Only now Iâm not. So thank you, Jake. Off you go, thenâback to New York, to your medicine. I wonder if thereâre more damsels in distress in Manhattan.â

âI suspect most women where I come from know how to rescue themselves.â

She didnât like that. It sounded as though she needed to get a bit of spine. She straightened and she pulled her hands away and she put as much spine in her voice as she could.â

âIâll remember you for ever,â she said, firmly and surely. âIâm sure I could have rescued myself, but it was much more fun being rescued by you. Thank you very much, Dr. Hunter. Iâm sorry I canât follow you to Manhattan. Iâm sorry I couldnât buy Bitsy as well as Itsy, and Iâm sorry you donât have a yard. Meanwhile we need to move on. We both have our careers to get back to.â

And somehow she smiledâand he mustnât know just how hard that smile wasâand she climbed into the car and started the engine.

âGoodbye, Tori,â Jake said, but her car was already moving.

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He felt sick. He stood in the car park of his fatherâs lodge and watched until he could no longer see her car.

Heâd let her go.

He had to. Heâd asked her to come with him and sheâd refused. What did she expect? That he stay here?

He thought back to the little scene back at Shoebox Mansions, to her impromptu clinic. People needing her. People expecting her to help at any time.

He compartmentalised his life. Heâd go nuts if he accepted that kind of need.

But thenâ¦ He turned and Glenda was on the verandah, watching him watch Tori leave. âOh, my dear,â she said and he thought, She understands.

How could she understand? She didnât know him.

Sheâd known his father.

Community.

No, he thought savagely. What had his mother said? It was insidious. It sucked you in.

His life was in Manhattan and he had no place here.

âDinnerâs ready,â Glenda said but her message was much deeper.

âYou go in,â he told her.

âWeâre waiting for you.â

Itâd be a long wait, he thought. He had limits.

He was not his fatherâs son.

âWeâre waiting,â Glenda said again, gently, and he gave up and walked inside with her.

He could do dinner. He just couldnât do the rest of his life.

CHAPTER EIGHT

She bought a sewing machine and hemmed curtains. Yes, this home was temporary. Yes, sheâd eventually think about rebuilding up on the ridge or selling and finding something else permanent, but right now that decision still seemed too hard.

Sewing was therapeutic, trying to keep trailing drapes from Itsy. So was taking a complete break from injured wildlife.

So was letting herself think about Jake.

He was just a memory, she told herself, a gorgeous guy whoâd helped her move on. Heâd been her five-minute date whoâd turned into her two-day stand.

But the thought of him still made her smile.

She should do something about getting a job, she thought as the days wore on. She shouldnât settle here and let herself dwell on Jake.

But she wasnât dwelling. Or not exactly. She was simply savouring what had happened. Why she felt different.

This morning sheâd sewn for a whole hour. Enough. She wouldnât mind a small nap.

This must be the lessening of pressure, she thought as she and Itsy and Rusty headed for bed. It was another reason she wasnât accepting a job right now. She was too tired.

âWe match,â she told they dogs. They got up and bounced into frenetic activity for an hour or so; Itsy wore Rusty out, wore herself out and then, both exhausted, they slept.

Rusty loved it; he loved Itsy, and Tori loved watching them. But she was as exhausted as they were.

âWeâre like litter mates,â she told them, letting them sneak up to her end of the bed.

And she slept, dreaming of Jake.

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He should have forgotten her by now, or at least he shouldnât be thinking of her as often as he was.

He needed more challenging cases, he decided. His patients were all too healthy. He worked steadily through a surgery list that he purposely left even longer than usual. He administered anaesthetic, he monitored his patients like a hawkâalmost hoping for a challengeâand they stayed nicely stable and he didnât have to do anything and then his thoughts drifted to Tori.

He should ring her and find out how she was doing. Or not.

Heâd rung Rob to find out how the new direction of the lodge was going. Heâd spoken to Glenda, who told him how well Doreen was, and that she was back at the lodge already, that she was without pain and that she was getting better every day. Glenda herself was also better. She was starting to be able to grip with her hand. Her life was so much better without pain. Her cat was settling in. There were two more guests at the lodge now, one with a cat and one with two chihuahuas.

And when finally he got to talk to Rob and casually enquired about Tori, Rob said bluntly he hadnât seen her, and his blonde had given him the flick, so he was over women for the moment. Glenda was a bit more forthcoming, but not much.

âNo, dear, we havenât seen her either. Wasnât she taking a job down in the valley? Doreen and I intend to find out where, so when Pickles needs his shots we can see her again. But Picklesâs shots arenât due for another three months.â

Great. He was dependent for news on Picklesâs shots. And he didnât have her phone number.

He wouldnât ring it even if he did, he decided. Itâd meanâ¦

Itâd mean nothing. It was what friends and colleagues did. Itâd make sense to ring and ask her how Itsy and Rusty were doing, whether sheâd found a job, where her life was going.

He wanted to.

He didnât. Heâd asked her to come to Manhattan with him. That request had changed things. Her anger had changed things.

Heâd messed up their friendship, so he worked and he tried not to think about her.

He was currently on his fourth case for the day. The patient under his hands was an obese diabetic. All the signs said his triple bypass should be a nightmare, but every one of his vital signs was great. Every monitor showed normal.

The surgical team was chatting between themselves but they let him be. They knew Jake was normally silent. He had the

reputation of being aloof.

That was the way he liked itâwasnât it?

Onlyâ¦it meant there was time to think, and right now thinking was the one thing Jake didnât know how to handle.

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She wasnât quite sure when she started thinking it, but when she did she couldnât get it out of her head.

It started with a vague sense of uneaseâa wondering about the sleepiness. Why was she so tired? And then she thoughtâ¦

And then she tried not to think. Only she couldnât.

It was only that she was thinking about Jake too much, she told herself, but it had her trying to remember.

Her files had been burned along with everything else. The important dates were gone and her memory had holes in it.

Many of the people from the ridge were suffering like this, she knew. Trauma had left gaps in their collective pasts. Post-traumatic stress disorder?

But giving a name to what was happening wasnât helping. Not when something else might be happening. Or might have happened.

She could phone Susie, she thought, only thatâd give voice to her fears.

âSusie, when did I have my contraceptive implant put in? Am I overdue for renewal?â

She looked up the brand of her implant on the Webâcautiouslyâand found what she didnât want to read.

Effective pregnancy prevention for three years. After that, marked decreasing efficacy. Replacement must be undertaken within the three-year window.

Decreasing efficacyâ¦

Surely she canât have been due to change. Surely she couldnât be that dumb.

Could she?

She wasnât ringing Susie, she decided. The problem with having a friend as her doctor was that her doctor was also her friend. Sheâd never be allowed to get away with a simple query. Like, when wasâ¦when *am* I due to change.

So wait.

She woke three weeks after Jake had left and nothing had

happenedâagain. She showered and dressed and she felt too nauseous to face breakfast. She took Rusty and Itsy for a walk into town. She came home and she felt like a sleep again. Only first sheâd just check out the package sheâd brought from the local pharmacy.

She looked.

A thin blue line.

She stared at it for maybe ten minutes. It didnât change.

She tried the second packet.

Another blue line.

Shock held her motionless. Strangely, though, she wasnât devastated. She couldnât be. Even though she was stunned, there was a tiny part of her that admittedâ¦joy? Dumb or what, but there it was.

Maybe subconsciously sheâd been expecting it. The lethargy that had enveloped her for the past few weeks almost seemed to have prepared her.

She went out onto the front porch of her shoebox and stared at the distant hills.

She was pregnant.

She was twenty-nine. She had a great careerâslightly stalled at the moment but ready to resume any time she wanted. She had heaps of insurance money.

She could have a baby.

She *was* having a baby.

Like Micki.

Her sisterâs face was suddenly before her, laughing, joyful. âTori, feel. Heâs kicking. My babyâs kicking.â

Her hand went to her tummy and pressed. *My baby.*

And with the thought came a surge of joy so great it threatened to make her head explode.

âWeâre having a baby,â she told the dogs, trying the words out to see how they sounded.

After so much destructionâ¦ Life.

She was carrying Jakeâs baby.

âIâm going to have to tell him,â she told the dogs.

To not tell him was unthinkable.

Would he be angry? She deserved his anger. Sheâd promised him she was safe.

âItâs early days, though.â She was talking out loud, thinking out loud. âSomething could happen.â

No. Both hands were on her tummy now, as if somehow she could protect it.

Nothing would happen to this baby.

âSo tell him,â she whispered. âPhone him tonight.â

She couldnât. She wasnât brave enough. Heâd think sheâd lied to him. Heâd thinkâ¦

âI have to explain,â she whispered, and then the phone rang.

âDoc Nicholls? We heard you were at a bit of a loose end. How do you feel about a flying trip to the States?â

CHAPTER NINE

THE last case had been complex and heâd welcomed it. Finally, here was medicine that held his full attention.

Jeff Holden was someone heâd worked with before. Jeff had needed surgery as a child and had recurring adhesions. Jake had recognised him as heâd come in.

Jeff had been allocated to one of his more junior anaesthetists, but almost to his surprise heâd found himself changing the list. Taking time to talk to him before he put him under.

âDo you watch baseball?â

âNo.â

âDo you watch football, then?â heâd asked.

To his surprise Jeff did, and so did the nurse assisting, and instead of a tense few moments before theatre thereâd been a heated discussion about Jeffâs teamâand while he worked he figured he ought to learn more about a sport he only took a fleeting interest in.

Now the operation was overâsuccessfully, he thought, though with adhesions you could never be sureâand he thought maybe he could hang around until Jeff was properly awake. This surgeon was known as being curt. Jake had watched the operation. He knew the outcome and maybe he could answer questions.

Thanks to Tori he was changing, he decided, as he reversed the anaesthetic and headed out into the recovery area. And as if the thought had conjured herâ¦Tori was there.

For a moment he thought he was dreaming. He wasnât. She was in full surgical garbâshe must, to be allowed into this area. She had green gown, green cap, green bootees.

Green eyes.

Tori.

She was chatting to a patient at the end of the recovery queueâa woman wide-awake and ready for an orderly to take her

back to the ward.

Both of them were smiling.

She looked up and saw him and she stopped smiling. She said something to the woman in the bed, and she turned to face him.

âHi,â she said. âI believe you owe me three and a half minutes, Dr. Hunter. Iâm here to collect.â

Shock held him immobile for all of three seconds. Now, thoughâ¦ He was across the room before he knew it, and he meant to take her hands, or he thought he meant to take her hands, but instead she was folded against him in a hold that felt good, felt right, felt wonderful. Her surgical cap was under his chin. He wanted to feel her curls, but they were in a hospital ward and she was gowned, almost a professional, and it seemed every one of his colleagues had suddenly found an excuse to be here.

How long had she been here? Had his colleagues known? Why hadnât someone told him?

âShe wouldnât let us.â Brad, the oldest of the orderlies, answered his question before he asked. âShe came to reception a couple of hours ago looking for you. Marie gowned her and brought her in here.â

âI was just as happy in the waiting room,â Tori said, tugging away so she was at armâs length, and grinning happily up at him with that smile that had knocked him sideways a month ago and was still knocking him sideways now. âBut Marie asked me where I was from and we got talking and next thing I was in here. Itâs been lovely, watching everyone wake up, procedure over.â

âSheâs been talking to the Holloways,â Brad said, his gaze on Tori openly speculative. âSheâs calmed them right down.â

The Holloways?

Jodi Holloway was seventeen with a diagnosis of kidney cancer. The parents had been close to hysterics since the diagnosis, but the surgery, performed by Centralâs most skilled urologist, had gone well.

âYou know our Jim,â Brad said ruefully, still seeming to sense what he was thinking. âIf the great man says one more word than he must, itâll kill him. He told the Holloways thereâd been a complete excision and the recurrence rate was on the outer edge of the normal curve, and then he went off to find his

dinner. Only of course we had Jodie looking like death after anaesthesia and Mr. Holloway staring after Jim like heâd never heard a word and Mrs Holloway threatening to have hysterics. And hereâs your Tori, moving in like sheâs our own personal counsellor only better, saying, No, itâs fantastic news, and drawing them a normal curve and explaining probability and saying, Wow, if Jodiâs outside normal limits for recurrence, then thereâs only this tiny chance itâll come back, itâs the best news. And by the time Jodie woke up she had both parents smiling. So if you donât keep her we will,â Brad said, grinning, and Jake realised everyone was grinningâpractically the whole ward.

What was she doing here?

âTwo and a half minutes now,â she said softly, for only them to hear. âWe need to talk.â

âIâm almost finished.â

âSo you should be,â Brad said darkly. âYou started at six this morning and itâs almost midnight. Take him home,â he told Tori. âAnd heâs not supposed to be on call tomorrow so you can keep him â til Monday.â

âI wonât keep him,â Tori said, sounding suddenly strained. âI have a hotel,â she said to Jake. âI donât want to intrude.â

âYouâre not intruding,â Jake said, feeling more and more as though his world had just lit up again. He didnât know why she was here but he was pleased to see her on all sorts of levels. âGive me a minute to finish up here and weâll go find somewhere to eat.â

âAt this hour?â she said doubtfully. âWill anywhere be open? â

âHey, this isnât Combadeen,â he said, grinning. âI donât know why youâve come, but welcome to Manhattan.â

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She felt as if she was here under false pretences. He was acting as though he was really pleased to see her. She should just blurt it out now, she thought, but she had to wait until heâd spoken to the family of the guy heâd just been working on, and heâd checked his patient was fully awake and could take in what he was saying. So she watched and waited, calm on the outside. She was anything but calm on the inside.

But finally he was finished. He filled in his paperwork, they

both got rid of their gowns and, at last, he was ushering her out through the hospital entrance.

Heâd taken her arm as if he was genuinely pleased to see herâas though she was a favourite friend dropping in unexpectedly.

âYou look great,â he said, and she smiled, but absently. Sheâd put all sorts of effort into her appearance but now she was too nervous to think about it. How to tell him?

âWhy are you here?â he asked, and at least that was easy.

âAfter the wildfires we have lots of animals that canât go back to the wild. Zoos are offering them homes. I was asked if Iâd come with a consignment of two koalas and four wombats.â

âTo Manhattan?â

âClose enough.â

âClose enough to drop in for a visit,â he said and tugged her closer. âSo where are the dogs?â

âAt the lodge. Robâs nursing a broken heart. Heâs a great puppy sitter. But, Jakeâ¦I needed to talk to you. I was trying to phone you. But then they asked me to come with the animals. Thereâs somethingâ¦â

They were in the crowded entrance to Emergency. People were bustling past them, intent, urgent. An ambulance was pulling up; people were spilling out. Life was happening all around them but Toriâs life was centred right here, on this moment, and it could wait no longer.

âIâm pregnant,â she said, loud enough for a guy pushing a wheelchair towards the entrance to grin and say, âLovely news, dear. Come back in a few months and see how smooth I can push a gurney.â

Tori flushed from the toes up.

Jake stopped. They both stopped.

She knew what heâd say. She braced, waiting. No, she thought, wildly, she didnât know what heâd say; for there were two alternatives.

He could say, âYou told me you were safe.â

Or he could say, âWhose is it?â Or, âHow do I know itâs mine?â

Sheâd been trying to figure out answers to both, trying to force herself not to react. It was she whoâd made the mistake. He

was allowed to be angry.

But nowâ¦ The silence was stretching out and she thought, Which, whichâ¦

âHey, itâs okay,â he said finally, strongly, catching her hands in his. âTori, donât look like that. We can cope with this. But you will have to move here.â

She blinked. This was so much what she hadnât expected. Simple acceptance.

You will have to move here.â¦ She could ignore that, she thought. That was an aside. What mattered most was that he knew. Sheâd told him.

âI thought I was safe,â she started.

âSo did I. I guess we were both wrong.â

âNo, but I told youâ¦ I thoughtâ¦â

âAnd I accepted your assurance because I wanted you,âhe said, and his hands were firm and sure, imparting strength and reassurance. âTori, I know you well enough to accept youâd never lie about something so important. But hey, weâre both medical. We both know the only true contraceptive is a brick wall. So where do we go from here?â

âI donât know,â she managed, shocked almost beyond speech. She pulled away a little and stared up at him, searching for anger. She saw shock, she thought, but no anger at all. Not even revulsion. Just a man taking in important news and trying to deal with it as best he could. A man concerned for her. âThank you,â she whispered, awed.

âFor making you pregnant?â His mouth quirked at the corners and she thought, Heâs laughing. The concept of laughter right now was so ludicrous it wasâ¦ludicrous.

Maybe she wouldnât mind a bit more emotion, she thought. Was she reaching for the stars to want joy?

âI meant, thank you for not yelling,â she said, thinking it wasnât enough.

âWhy would I yell?â

âBecause I made a mistake. Andâ¦and for not asking me who the father is.â

There was a pause at that. âI have too great a respect for self-preservation for that,âhe said finally, grave again. âI donât want to be kicked into the middle of next week.â

âI donât think I could kick you that far.â

âYouâd be entitled to. Come to dinner. Itâs close.â

They didnât talk again until he ushered her into a late-night diner, where a guy called Louis greeted him by name and ushered them into an alcove he obviously used a lot.

âBurger and fries for me,â Jake said. âLouis does the best. Would you like some, too?â

âNo!â

âDry toast?â Jake tried, sympathetically, and Tori screwed up her nose again and so did Louis, his eyes alight with interest.

âHow about hot cakes with blueberries,â Louis said encouragingly. âA nice short stack, guaranteed not to overwhelm a lady. And maybe a glass of wine?â

âMaybe hotcakes and tea,â Tori said gratefully, and Louis beamed and disappeared and Tori was left with Jake and his nice, sensible reaction.

Sheâd sweated over this moment for three weeks now. Tried to figure what to say. Now it had been said. Sheâd done what sheâd come to do.

She didnât even need to stop and have hotcakes, she thought suddenly. She could go home. Only she wasnât going home. Not now. Not yet. She was sitting in a late-night diner with Jake, about to have hotcakes while he assimilated fatherhood into his life plan.

Sensibly.

Anger was rising again. Unreasonable? Maybe.

She wanted joy.

âHowâ¦â he ventured at last.

âI had a contraceptive implant.â Sheâd rehearsed this question. âThey last for three years. Only then my life fell apart and I forgot it was due for replacement. The nightâ¦the night weâ¦â

âMade love,â he said gently, and she stared at her hands and nodded.

âMade love,â she repeated softly. âIt was love, wasnât it. Of a sort. All I could think that night was that I neededâI wantedâyou, and I thought, Yes, Iâm protected. Even after-wards I didnât worry. Only then, when I tried to figure it out, all my records were burned in the fire. As were Dr. Susieâs, so the letters that were supposed to go out reminding people of routine stuff were

never sent. So there you are. Comedy of errors. Resulting in one baby.â

âOur baby.â

âIf you want a sayâ¦â

âYouâre not considering termination?â

âNo!â

âWhy?â

âMickiâs baby died. Thereâs been enough death. *I want this baby*.â

Louis arrived then, with their meals. The normally jovial host had sussed them out by now. He left, with only a sideways, speculative glance at Jake.

âSo you came to Manhattan just to tell me,â Jake said.

âI donât want anything from you, if thatâs what you mean.â She concentrated on her hotcakes and left him to his thoughts.

Â

There were a million sensations running through him right nowâshock, disbelief that this could be happening, overwhelming responsibilityâ¦yeah, and a healthy dose of fear, too. But the one that suddenly hit the top was anger.

âYouâll take my help,â he snapped, before he could control the anger behind his words. âItâs my call, too, Tori. You have my baby, then Iâm in the equation, like it or not. Youâll stay here.â

Her face stilled. She met his gaze steadily, but he thought he saw a flash of fear behind her eyes. What had she expected?

What was she expecting?

âNo,â she said. âYou know where my home is, and itâs not here.â

âYour homeâs burned. Your home could be anywhere.â

âIn your dreams.â

âEat your dinner, Tori,â he said, forcing his tone to gentle, and almost to his surprise she did. She nodded and addressed herself again to her hotcakes.

They seemed to agree with her. His appetite had deserted him but he ate his burger on automatic pilot while Tori made her way through Louisâs truly excellent hotcakes. She didnât speak. She drank her tea, cradling her cup as though she needed the comfort of its warmth.

Sheâd done some serious shopping, he thought, watching her. She looked great, in tight-fitting jeans, high boots, a tiny white coat. Then he realised she wouldnât be able to wear those jeans for much longer.

She was carrying his child. She was alone and she was pregnant.

She had to stayâbut he couldnât force her.

âI didnât mean to scare you,â he said, and she flashed him a look of mistrust.

âThis is new territory for both of us,â she murmured. âScary territory.â

âPeople do it all the time.â

âNot me. Not us.â Then she shrugged. âLook, this has been a big shock to throw at you. Itâs after midnight. You must be exhausted. I know I am. Iâm staying tomorrow so if you want to talk about it againâ¦â

âYouâre staying tomorrow?â

âI have a flight booked the day after. I thought Iâd take two days after the delivery, one to tell you and one to let you come to terms with it and yell.â

She was only half joking. Sheâd expected anger?

There was anger, he thought, but the anger wasnât at her. It was at himself. Heâd met her when she was at her most vulnerable. Why had he ever touched her?

âWe canât undo it,â she said, evenly and steadily, seemingly forcing herself to be calm. âIâm sorry to give you this responsibility you donât want. Iâm not sorry for me, though, so donât you be sorry for me either. Iâm a big girl and I can cope with this. In fact, I intend to love this baby. I suspect all Combadeen will love it.â She rose. âCan I catch a cab back at the hospital?

âWhere are you staying?â

She told him and he frowned. âItâs Saturday night. That whole district parties. Thereâs no way youâll sleep.â

âIt looked fine.â

âWhen did you arrive?â

âFour. I came to the hospital almost straightaway.â

âAnd I made you waitâ¦â He was trying to get jumbled thoughts into order but it was like herding ants. All he could see was Toriâs pale face, and all he could register was that this

woman was carrying his child.

âTell you what,â he said, noting her too-big eyes, the effort bravado was costing her, knowing half of her wanted to run. âMy apartmentâs got a great settee in the living room. Thereâs more than enough sleeping space for two. I bought the place knowing I needed to sleep any time, so quietâs where itâs at.â

âI donât want to stay with you.â

âYou can trust me, Tori,â he said, gently but inexorably. âDonât you?â

She stared at him for a long moment, a moment that stretched on into something far beyond trust for a night shared. It stretched into something that was important for their future. Shared parenting? And something more, he thought, but that was suddenly somewhere he didnât want to go. Not yet. Not ever?

âLetâs get a cab,â he said, focusing on practicalities, because practicalities were all he could bear to think about. âIâll take you to your hotel. If Iâm exaggeratingâif you think you can sleep thereâthen Iâll leave you and weâll meet in the morning. But if what I say is true, will you trust me enough to bring your gear back to my apartment? Separate rooms, Tori. Nothing you donât want, I promise.â

âAnd youâll let me leave?â

âI donât have a choice.â

âNo,â she said heavily. âYou donât.â

Â

He was right, her hotel was appalling. They went back to his apartment. Jake slept on the settee. Tori slept in his room.

âIâll spend the night pacing,â he told her when she objected. âSo I might as well pace on the balcony. Once upon a time a man could go through a couple of packets of smokes in this situation. Now itâs traffic fumes or nothing.â

She was so tired she hardly smiled. So he made up the settee for himself, and Tori lay in Jakeâs bed and thought she was so tired she should sleep, but sleep was a long time coming.

The bed was really comfortable and really big. Big enough to entertain?

Thereâd have been women. Of course there must have been women.

But none of them had stayed very long, she thought. This place was almost clinically austere.

Her little relocatable home had been austere and beige. This place was austere and grey.

Maybe it was chic, but she hated it just the same as sheâd hated the drabness of her relocatable. It was cool and grey and impersonal.

She missed her dogs.

The dogs were fine. Theyâd hardly miss her. But there was no oneânothingâto hug.

There was silence from the sitting room. Maybe Jake wasnât serious about pacing. Maybe heâd said that to make her think he was taking her news seriouslyâthat he thought it was a big deal.

Heâd accepted it so smoothly. Maybe it had even happened before.

That was unthinkable.

But why should she lie here and want this baby to be as new and as wonderful an experience for Jake as it was for her?

It couldnât be, she thought. She and her baby would be in Australia. Jake would be here.

Sheâd organise videos.

Not of the birth, though, she thought hastily. There was no way she was going there. Sheâd do that on her own.

By herself. There was a bleak thought.

Jet lag was insidious, she decided. Exhaustion was making her depressed, or maybe it was this appalling apartment. Jake had prints on the wallâcharcoal sketches of something avant garde. Horrible. In the moonlight she couldnât see detail; she could only see the vague outline of garish figures.

Thinking on, it wasnât even moonlight. It was the glare of a million buildings, lit at night with a million neon signs.

How could she be homesick when sheâd been away for less than a week?

No matter; she was. She wanted the dogs. She wanted to hear the birds in the trees outside her window.

She wanted for Jake to be not right through that door and for that door not to be closed.

âGo to sleep,â she told herself firmly, desperately. âNow.â

Pigs might fly.

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Jake had learned from years of being on call to hit the pillow and summon sleep. Self-preservation had taught him the knack. It had never failed himâuntil now.

Heâd never had Tori sleeping right through the wall until now.

Heâd never been told heâd be a father until now.

He wantedâ¦

He didnât know what he wanted.

He wanted Tori.

If you made a woman pregnant you married her. It was an old dictumâdid it still apply?

Sheâd already refused him.

He didnât know the first thing about relationships. Where to start?

By taking tomorrow off. Yeah, okay, he thought wryly, good one. It was his rostered day off anyway. Very magnanimous. He could do a quick check-in at the hospital before she woke and then heâd show her New York.

But Monday he had a list longer than his arm, and it was too late to delegate. Sheâd be on her own then.

He could probably cut it a bit. Get home at a reasonable hour.

To find the little wife waiting for him, with supper served and his slippers warmed?

Tori was right. It was a ludicrous concept. Only it had to be thought of. She had to stay.

Why?

He had a sudden vision of himself, aged about seven. Summer holidays. His mother off with one of her lovers. He in his grandparentsâ mausoleum of a house on Long Island.

Lonely as hell.

Tori was having his baby, and his kid wasnât going to be lonely. If he was going to be a father, he wanted his kid here, whether Tori agreed or not.

His kid?

Heâd never thought of being a father. Heâd had such a solitary upbringing; heâd simply expected more of the same.

Heâd reacted calmly enough to Toriâs news. Or more. Heâd

been so stunned that all he could feel was concern for Tori. To think past that to fatherhood itselfâ¦

Heâd have a daughter? A son?

The idea was so overwhelming he couldnât take it in.

He let it swirl for a while, trying to figure things out, but no matter how he looked at it, one thing stood out. This child would *not* have his upbringing. His mother telling lies about his father. His parents continents apart.

She had to stay.

Heâd marry the mother of his child.

Â

She slept until ten, and when she woke Jake was standing over her, lean and long and gorgeous, wearing a sleek business suit, a crisp white shirt and a crimson tie. What theâ¦

She glanced from him to the clockâand yelped.

He grinned and set toast on the bedside table, then sat on the side of the bed. It was such a familiar thing to do that she practically yelped again.

âFeel up to breakfast?â he said and smiled, and she thought, This man is the father of my child. That was such a seriously sexy, seriously wonderful thing to think that her toes practically curled.

But what was with the suit?

âYouâre dressed up, why?â she managed.

âIâve been into the hospital so I could clear the rest of the day.â

âI thought you had today off.â

âI donât do off days, but Iâm free now. Moving onâ¦ You donât look like you have morning sickness,â he said, and she hauled her thoughts back to earth. Or almost back to earth.

âIâm only sick if I move fast.â

âThen donât move fast.â

âI wonât.â

He leaned forwards and took the pillows from the spare side of the bed, then wedged them behind her. And there it was again, that blast of caring. And of maleness. And ofâ¦want?

Down, girl, she told herself fiercely. You have twenty-four hours left of this man. Thereâs no use lusting after

somethingâsomeoneâyou canât have.

But she was definitely lusting.

He was handing over tea and she had to take it, even though there was suddenly a really big part of her that wanted to fling the tea onto his cool-grey carpet, grab him and haul him back onto his own pillows. He was the father of her baby.â¦

âSo have you ever been to New York?â he asked, and she blinked and had a couple of sips of tea and mustered her hormones into some sort of corral. But the boundaries she put around them looked frail. Very frail indeed.

âNo,â she managed, and her voice came out a squeak and she had to try again.

âSo where have you been?â He handed over toast. Her fingers brushed his and she practically yelped all over again. She had to get herself under control.

âUm, Sydney?â she ventured.

âIs that the furthest?â he demanded, astounded.

âYeah,â she said, defensive, and then because she didnât want him to think she hadnât travelled because she was a wimp, she told him the rest. âMum died when Micki and I were small. Dad had the veterinary practice up and we helped him, after school, every holiday. I thought I might travel for a bit after vet school but by the time I finished, Dad had Parkinsonâs. Mickiâs marriage was in trouble and she was in Perth. She couldnât help. If I hadnât stayed Dad would have had to sell up and itâd have broken his heart.â She paused and then added quietly, âThough if he sold up maybe heâd still be alive.â

âHey, Tori, donât.â He smiled, coaxing her to let it go. âYou canât beat yourself up over decisions like that. And youâre here now,â he said. âYour first overseas experience. You need to stay for more than a day.â

âNo.â The thought terrified her.

âNot necessarily with me.â

âIâd mess with your life,â she said and glanced at the spare side of the bed.

âThereâs no one.â

âI didnât mean that.â

âOkay, you didnât mean that, but Iâm telling you anyway. If you want to sleep in my bed for the next monthââ

âNo!â

âNo?â

âNo,â she said, and she sounded desperate but there wasnât anything she could do about it. âI need to get up now.â

âIf you need to sleep, then sleep.â

âIf Iâve only got one day in New York, Iâm not sleeping.â

âYou should take more.â

âIâm house-training Itsy,â she said. âI canât take more.â

âToriâ¦â

âI havenât come to interfere with your life. Iâve just come to tell you and then to go.â

âI canât see that I can let you go.â

âYou donât have a choice,â she said, trying hard to sound firm and sure and confident. Was he planning on locking her up until this baby was born? Ha! Sheâd thrown him, she thought. Sheâd had a month to get used to the idea of a baby. Heâd had less than a day.

âSo Iâll get up and you can point me to the Statue of Liberty,â she said, moving right on.

âIs that what you want to see?â

âAnd the Empire State Building, and Central Park and Tiffanyâs.â

âTiffanyâs?â he said blankly.

âMy very favourite movie in the whole world. Donât you just love Audrey Hepburn?â

âLike life itself,â he said promptly, and she giggled and ate a bit of toast and thought, This could be okay. Sheâd do the tourist thing, maybe theyâd meet for dinner tonight; theyâd discuss practicalities like just how much access he wanted and how they were going to figure it out, and then sheâd head back to Australia and get on with it.

âIâll go put on my walking shoes,â he said.

âYou donât have to come with me,â she said, startled. âIâm guessing youâll already have seen the Statue of Liberty.â

âI might have,â he agreed. âBut sheâs worth a second look. And to be honest, Iâve never once been inside Tiffanyâs.â

CHAPTER TEN

THEY did the Empire State Building. They had to queue for two hours but at the top she gasped and decreed the view was worth every minute. She produced a camera and took the shots every tourist took, but she insisted on having him front and centre.

âThis is your town,â she said. âIâm visiting Jakeâs Manhattan. This is Jake with the Statue of Liberty in the background. Very nice.â

A tourist offered to take a shot of them together and she beamed. âThatâll be good for later,â she decreed, handing over her camera.

âLater?â He held her tightly as the German gentleman lined up the shotâbecause holding her close seemed the right thing to do. Also it was a good excuse to keep her near him. He hadnât forgotten how good she felt. His body was reminding him every time she came within touching distance.

He could hardly understand her smile, he thought. She must be jet-lagged. She was facing an uncertain future alone and, here she was, cheerfully soaking up every minute of her two-day visit.

She was gorgeous.

But thenâ¦ âThis will be a shot of Mummy and Daddy for our babyâs first album,â she told him as he held herâand desire gave way to something else entirely, a range of emotions he couldnât begin to understand. But he kept her still, and when he saw the resulting picture he thought no one would know by his fixed smile that he felt as if heâd been punched.

But he did feel as though heâd been punched. No matter how many traffic fumes heâd inhaled last night, he didnât have his head round this.

This lovely, vibrant woman was carrying his baby.

And she was only here until tomorrow.

Would he go to Australia for the birth? He must, he thought, as Tori went back to snapping views. And what if something happened early? A miscarriage. A problem later in the

pregnancy? What sort of antenatal care would she get in Combadeen?

How could he let her go back to Australia?

But how could he not? He had no hold on her. Theyâd had, what, a two-day relationship. There was no way a future could be based on that.

But stillâ¦

Still, he didnât know what to think.

Finally viewed out, Tori headed to the elevators. A big guy, overweight and overbearing, barged into the elevator beside Tori and pushed her backwards. He saw Toriâs hand instinctively move to protect a bump that wasnât there yet, and he wanted to move his body in between them and thump the guy into the bargain.

He wanted to say, âThatâs my kid in there. Watch it.â

More. He wanted to say, âThatâs my woman, and Iâll thump anyone who touches her.â

Only, of course, he didnât. He was civilised and careful; he was a senior medico with a responsible job; he was someone who taught nonaggressive solutions to his staff when patients were violent.

More. He was a guy who walked alone.

But he still wanted to punch the guyâs lights out.

His phone rang while he was thinking of it. He answered it as he always did.

âDr. Hunter?â

âSpeaking.â

âJancey Ian? Her intrathecal catheterâs packed up.â

He paused as the rest of the elevator streamed out around them. Swearing under his breath.

Jancey was a tiny African-American woman in her mid-seventies and she had advanced bone metastases. Heâd inserted morphine and local anaesthetic via an intrathecal catheter to stop pain that had been almost unbearable.

But not only did Jancey have crumbling vertebrae from the cancer, she also had severe arthritis. It had taken skill, experience and luck to get the drugs flowing to just the right spot. Itâd be a miracle if any of the junior doctors on duty could get the catheter back in.

âLevel of pain?â he asked, knowing already what the answer would be.

âBad.â Mardi Fry was the senior nurse on the ward. If she said *bad* it must be hellish.

âI canâtâ¦â

âYou can.â Tori was suddenly in front of him, facing him down. Sheâd only heard his side of the conversation, but obviously sheâd guessed the rest. âIâm an unexpected and uninvited guest, and Iâm a very happy tourist. Donât you dare leave someone in pain because of me. Iâll take a cab to Central Park. Meet me there if you can.â

âToriâ¦â

âStrawberry Fields at two oâclock,â she said, heading to the cab rank already and calling back over her shoulder. âThatâs the bit I most want to see in Central Park. Or back at your apartment at six.â

And she was gone before he could even argue.

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She was asleep when he found her, right where sheâd said sheâd be, in Central Park, snoozing on a bench in the weak autumn sunlight, with a bag of uneaten bagels on her knee. He touched her on the shoulder and she opened her eyes and smiled at him.

He thought back to the number of dates heâd had to interrupt for medical necessity. Thereâd always been reproof. But Tori was smiling at him as if this was a whole new date.

âHey, itâs only two oâclock,â she said. âWell done. All fixed? â

âPiece of cake,â he said. âCatheter went in like a dream.â In fact, it had been a nightmare, but it was okay now. Jancey was out of pain and asleep.

She searched his face, and he thought she saw the truth, but she said nothing. No recriminations. No questions

A woman in a million.

âSo what were you dreaming of?â he asked.

âNames.â

âNames?â

âBaby names,â she said, as if he was a little bit thick. âFor some reason now Iâm in Strawberry Fields Iâm thinking Jude.

But Iâm also thinking maybe Elizabeth for my mother?â

âYou donât sound sure.â

âAnd why would I be sure? This babyâs the size of a peanut, and do you know how many books there are on childrenâs names? If you help me weâll barely get through them.â

âDo you want me to help?â

There was a momentâs silence, and then, carefully, as if she was bestowing a huge honour on him, she broke her bagel in half.

âShare,â she said. âThatâs why Iâm here. Though I have to say if your mother was Gertie itâs not going to happen.â

âItâs not, but I donât think I want anyone called after my mother anyway.â

âThatâs right, she was a horror,â Tori said cheerfully, bestowing his parentage the attention it deserved. Which in itself was strangely healing. âThat makes life easier. Can we go to Tiffanyâs now?â

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So they went to Tiffanyâs, a place Jake had never been to. Yes, it was famous, but it was definitely a girl place. He felt like waiting outside, only then he couldnât watch Tori enjoy herself, which was growing more and more unthinkable.

So in he went. The doorman welcomed them and the unobtrusive staff watched with indulgent eyes. Of all the women in here Tori stood out. She was a woman with no rings on her fingers, nothing, no jewellery at all.

But Tori wasnât looking at anything she might buy. She was intent on the fantasy.

âOh, wow,â she breathed, as she reached a display case of tiaras that must be worth a kingâs ransom. Or several kingsâ ransoms, he thought, as he checked out the prices.

âArenât they wonderful,â Tori said, giggling. âWhat if you were wearing it and it fell off in the mud?â

âI donât think thereâs any mud where any of these are going.â

âNo,â she said, suddenly disapproving. âTheyâll be worn once a year, maybe, twice tops, and the rest of the time theyâll be stuck in a safe. There theyâll just sit until something like the fire happens, and what a waste.â

She had a different perspective, he thought, as he watched her move from jewel to jewel. She was loving looking at these beautiful things, but there was no wistfulness in her eyes at all.

Sheâd lost everything, and yet she wanted nothing.

âLook at this,â she breathed, and he looked more closely and was as stunned as she was.

It was the most amazing ring heâd ever seen. Its centre was a diamond, perfectly cut as a heart, and so large it took his breath away. Every facet glistened and sparkled. On the outer edge of the heart were five rubies, set into white gold to glitter at each extremity. Surrounding them was a ring of smaller diamonds; though, thinking on, they were only small in comparison to the central stone.

The ring was ostentatious and it was ridiculous and itâd take more muscle than most women had in their ring finger to wear it without complaintâbut for all that it was quite extraordinarily lovely. And it didnât even have a price tag.

âOh, wow,â Tori breathed. âWhat a knuckle duster.â She giggled againâand then she looked sideways at it. âYou know, itâs like something absolutely exquisite, but blown up,â she said slowly. âA little version would be just perfect, but thisâ¦ Itâs wonderful but itâs crazy.â

âYouâd never want something like this.â

âAre you kidding?â Again came that infectious chuckle. âWhatâs not to want? Mind, Iâd have to find me a sheikh, and sheikhs are in small supply where I come from.â

âDo you have any jewellery at all?â he asked, but almost as the words left his mouth he knew he shouldnât have asked. Sheâd been working when the fire came through. Nothing had been saved.

Toby, the erstwhile fiancÃ©, had a lot to answer for. Again, Jake found himself dealing with anger.

But the fire was history. Tori had moved on and so should he. And luckily Tori hadnât heard the question. Her attention was caught yet again.

âOhâ¦â

She was peering into a different display section now, where opulence had given way to a far more demure kind of beauty. She seemed totally captivated, not amused this time, but rather stunned.

She was gazing at a Celtic love knot, wrought in gold with silver threads woven through. Compared to the jewellery theyâd just looked at, this was tiny, but it was no less beautiful. Slivers of diamond were scattered through the knot, like stones set into rope. It looked rough, almost as though it had been hewn from the earth already formed. It hung on a simple silver chain, and Jake looked at it and then looked at Tori, and her eyes were shining with unshed tears.

âItâs like my motherâs,â she whispered. âItâs not the same but itâs so close. She wore it always. And it was burned.â She managed a watery smile. âI need to buy it,â she said simply, and an assistant was sliding it out of the display case before she finished speaking.

Tori reached to touch it with hands that trembled. She ran her fingers across its intricate surface, almost reverently.

âIâll take it,â she said and she hadnât even looked at the price.

âToriâ¦â

She was hardly aware of him. This chain had been a part of her past that was somehow being restored, Jake thought, as he watched her face, and he was feeling just a bit emotional himself. And he knew what he wanted to do. Heâd been thinking it ever since heâd walked into the place, and now was the right time.

âWill you let me?â he asked, and he laid his hand over hers. âIt would be my honour and my pleasureâand my pride as wellâto buy this for you.â

She turned, puzzled. âWhy?â

âYouâre the mother of my baby, âhe said simply and surely. In truth there were many emotions at play here, and the fact that Tori was pregnant was only a tiny part of the whole, but it was all he could understand right now.

âI need to do something to mark this,â he said softly, though the assistant had melted discreetly away. âItâs a piece of jewellery that reminds you of whatâs lost. Can it also be something to mark whatâs to come?â

She looked up at him then through a mist of tears. She gave a wavering smileâand she sniffed. Oh, for heavenâs sake, he was feeling teary himself. Whoa, that wasnât going to happen. What was this woman doing to him?

He got practical by handing over a handkerchief. Distracted, she gazed down at it in disbelief. âA handkerchief?â

âWhatâs wrong with a handkerchief?â

âGuys do this in romance novels,â she said faintly. âNot in real life. What sort of modern male carries handkerchiefs?â

âMen who get their laundry done?â But she wasnât listening. She was buying time, he thought, fighting to get her emotions in order. She turned her back on him and blew her nose, and when she turned back she had her face straightâor almost. Her eyes were still shimmering.

How had he ever thought she was plain? he wondered. She was quite extraordinarily beautiful.

He wanted her. He wanted her so badly.â¦

âBut I canâ¦I can afford it,â she said breathlessly. âEasily. Thereâs no need for you to pay.â

âI know that, but stillâ¦will you grant me the honour of buying it for you.â

âThere you go again,â she said darkly. âRomance novels have a lot to answer for. If I didnât know you made such a lousy five-minute dater Iâd suspect youâd been taking chivalry lessons.â

âNo lessons,â he said. âPut it on.â He lifted it from the velvet and held it out.

Silently she turned so he could fasten it around her neck. He clipped the hook closed, and then, because the temptation was irresistible, he bent and kissed her, lightly on the nape of her neck. Her skin felt smooth and lovely, and for an instantâ¦for just an instant, he felt her lean into him, let herself relax against him, trust him.

âJakeâ¦â

He wanted to kiss her properly, as he needed to kiss her, as she deserved to be kissed, but her moment of weakness was gone. She tugged away, apparently to look in the mirror, but he knew it was more than that. Heâd felt her body stiffen.

Heâd felt her fear.

Bad move, he thought. Very bad move, considering what he was thinking.

The assistant had melted away again in the emotional stuffâhow did they know to do that?âbut as Tori moved to the mirror she materialised again, beaming her approval.

âWill madam take it?â

âMadamâs taking it,â Tori said softly, and a slight tremor ran through her, a tremor she couldnât disguise. âMadam fell in love with romance novels when she was thirteen years old and she knows when sheâs hooked.â

âDoes this mean youâll let me buy it for you?â Jake asked.

âWhy yes,â she said softly. âYes, I believe it does.â

Â

They bought Chinese takeaway and took it back to the apartment for dinner because Tori was simply too tired to go on.

Jake usually ate at his kitchen bench. His dining table was covered in journals, half-written papers, important work in progress.

He could sort it and stack it neatly, he thought, but that could take half an hour. Or he could make Tori eat at the kitchen bench.

But if this was the only night he had to persuade her, then he needed to move fast. So he cleared the table by the simple expedient of tipping it lengthways. It worked a treat. Hey, when was the last time heâd seen this table? It had cost him a bomb. It was a great table.

Or maybe not, he conceded, thinking on. The table was of cool-grey lacquer, designed to match the apartmentâs cool-grey walls. He remembered Toriâs scathing comments about grey. Hmm.

Tori was looking at the mess as they ate, bemused. âItâll take you days to get that back in order.â

âI have days.â Heâd have all the time in the world after she went home, he thought. *If* she went home.

How to broach it again?

He didnât for a while. They shared their food. They both had sodaâheâd have liked a beer but Janceyâs catheter might mean heâd be called out again. They listened to music. She liked his music. That was something the decorator hadnât chosen.

âWhat timeâs your plane tomorrow?â he asked.

âLate afternoon. I figure Iâll sleep in.â

âNo more sightseeing?â

âI hear Sohoâs good,â she said. âBut maybe not. You need to go to work, right?â

He did. Heâd been trying to figure out how not to need to go to work, but case lists for Monday were always the most complex. If he cancelled, patients would be sent home.

âYou canât let them down,â Tori said softly, and he knew she understood.

He was doing a rapid assessment of cases in his head but it wasnât helping. Heâd seen Jack Carver in the cardiac ward on Friday. Jack had severe ulceration on his legs, so severe amputation was becoming an option. He needed shunts to restore blood supply back so they could heal, but he had a cardiac condition and diabetic complications as well. When Jake had done the initial assessmentâsomething he usually avoided but he seemed to be doing it more in the weeks since heâd met ToriâJackâs wife had been holding her husbandâs hand as though if she let go heâd drown.

âPlease,â sheâd said to him. âJackâs all I have. Make him well.â

The risk of Jack losing his legâor worseâwas increasing every day he waited. He couldnât reschedule, Jake thought grimly. No matter what he wanted personally, he needed to be there tomorrow.

And Jancey would be watching the door, waiting for him. He couldnât let Jancey down.

âI could have done with some warning of your visit,â he growled, but Tori shook her head.

âI suspect youâd still be as busy even if you were expecting me, and I didnât want to interrupt your life. I *donât* want to interrupt your life. Soho will just be shops. I might go on my own or I might just sleep, but either way, I can take a cab to the airport. I donât need your company.â

But her voice wobbled a little at that, and he noticed her fingers crept to the chain at her throat.

âYou should stay,â he said strongly.

âI need to go home. I need to start my life as I need to go on.â

âWhy not stay here?â

âWe already talked about that.â

âIâd like to marry you.â

There was a sharp intake of breath. Butâ¦ âYouâve said that before,â she whispered, still touching her chain. âJust because

Iâm having your baby, it doesnât make it any better.â

âI think I love you.â

She gazed across the table at him, seemingly bemused. Seemingly astounded. âYou think?â

âI donât know,â he admitted. âHell, Tori, I havenât done this before.â

âDone what?â

âBecome involved.â

âYou sound like itâs happened against your will.â

âWell, what do you think?â he said, raking his hair. âI donât have a clue how Iâm feeling. But weâre going to be parents. You need to rebuild anyway. Youâve lost everything.â¦â

And finally she reacted with something apart from shock. âI havenât lost everything,â she retorted, and she tilted her chin and met his gaze levelly and calmly.

âOkay, youâve got your dogs,â he conceded.

âIâve got my home.â

âA relocatable.â

âI have my community.â The emotion now was suddenly pure, unmitigated anger. âI have my work,â she said, struggling to stay calm. âYou have your work, too. Itâs important, as my workâs important. But I have more. I have *place*. My parents lived and worked at Combadeen and so do I. I know every family rebuilding on the ridge. My parents are buried in the Combadeen cemetery. Iâve buried my dogs behind our house. Okay, Iâve been stunned, shocked, gutted by the fires and their aftermath but Iâm handling it. And Iâm moving on to make a home for myself, in my place, not in some sterile, grey, designer shoebox on the seventeenth floor of a thirty storey tower block.â

âItâs notââ

âA shoebox? Yes, it is,â she retorted. âTheyâre all shoeboxes. Itâs whatâs around them that matters, and whatâs in them. Here, youâd be at work all day every day, and the shoebox would close in on me.â

âYou could work part-time. We could get somewhere a bit bigger. Hell, Tori, you need looking after.â

âI donât need looking after.â

âYouâre pregnant.â

âAnd I still donât need looking after.â Her anger was building

rather than subsiding. âI have a community who cares. I have friends and I have colleagues. Youâve seen me at a point where I was at my lowest, where the resources of the whole district were stretched to the limit, but donât judge me on that. Donât judge Combadeen by that. Thereâs not one person in Combadeen whoâd suggest I live in a grey monument to solitude and go crazy!â

âYou wouldnât go crazy.â

âI would if I lived here,â she said, rising and glowering. âSo would you, but you donât live here either. You use it to crash or to study or to take a shower. No one lives in places like this. Livingâ¦ Jake, you donât know what living is, and Iâm surely not raising my child teaching him this life is normal.â

She closed her eyes then, and she swayed. He was on his feet in an instant, surging around the table to hold her, but her eyes snapped open and she stepped away.

âNo,â she said. âDonât.â

âDonât?â

âDonât touch me,â she whispered. âI was a fool to come. The truth was I wanted to see you, as well as needing to tell you about our baby, but it was wrong. You and meâ¦ No. Thereâs no you and me.â

âToriâ¦â

âYouâre alone,â she whispered. âAnd thatâs the way you want it. But if Iâm alone Iâd curl up and die. I need people. I need dogs. I needâ¦life.â

She sighed then and steadied.

âIâm sorry, Jake,â she said. âGetting angry was dumb. Yelling at you is dumb. Youâre doing the best you can.â She shook her head as if clearing fog. âOkay, hereâs confession time,â she said. âIâm trying desperately not to fall in love with you. You say you might love me? Well, maybe I know that I could love you. And you know what that means? If I came here, then youâd risk me clinging.â

He didnât understand. âWhy would you cling? You have your work.â

âIâm not talking about my work. Iâm talking about needing you, and you needing me. Youâre fine with the idea of looking after me. Could you ever admit that *you* need *me*?â

âIâ¦â There was deathly silence.

âNo,â she said, and she was fighting now for the composure sheâd lost. âEnough. This is dumb talk, and we both know it. Weâre two mature professionalsâwe can handle this. Your work is waiting, and my life is waiting. So please, Jakeâ¦â

She took a deep breath. âPlease, Jake,â she said again. âIâm exhausted and I need to go to bed. Thank you for a wonderful day.â Her fingers crept once again to her Celtic knot. âThank you for my chain. Iâll keep it for ever. But nowâ¦â Another deep breath.

âNow Iâm going into your bedroom,â she said softly, steadying. âAnd Iâm going to bed. Alone. Thatâs the way it has to be. We both know that. I guess when I wake up in the morning youâll be gone to work. So Iâll get on my plane tomorrow and I wonât look back. Yes, youâll want to see our baby. We can work that out later. But we need to do it in a way where I can be normal and civil, and the fact that I had the best night of my life with you, and Iâm thinking entirely inappropriate thoughts, can be forgotten. Please, Jake, thatâs what I need. So goodnight.â

And before he could guess what she intended, she took three swift steps towards him. She took his face in her hands and she kissed him, fast and hard, on the mouth. Then, before he had a chance to respond, before he could hold her as he needed to hold her, she pushed herself away.

âGoodnight, Jake,â she said, firmly and steadily. âAnd goodbye.â

And she was gone, into his bedroom, closing the door firmly behind her.

And he knew he couldnât follow.

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It was all very well being angry and virtuous and sure. Anger and virtue and certainty lasted all the way until the door was shut, and then she just felt miserable.

Nothing else. Just plain bad.

Heâd asked her to marry him and sheâd refused.

Sheâd hardly had a choice, she told herself, fighting to drum up anger again.

What had she hoped for?

And there was the crux. The biggie. Hope. Finally she was acknowledging exactly what sheâd hoped for.

She loved him. Sheâd told herself that one night together was simply a way of moving on, but it was so much more, and that was regardless of her pregnancy. Heâd said he thought he loved her but he didnât know what it meant.

Love.

She thought back to Jake holding her as theyâd buried a little koala named Manya. She thought of the way heâd held Glendaâs hand, of the way heâd laughed at Bitsy.

She thought of Jake in the ward, talking through a procedure to the patient he was about to anaesthetise, carefully so there could be no misunderstanding. She knew heâd be wonderful.

She thought of the way Jakeâs body felt against hers.

âOh, enough, youâre behaving like a moonstruck teenager,â she scolded herself. âYouâve come all this way and heâs been lovely. Heâs taken you sightseeing. Heâs given you a beautiful piece of jewellery. Heâs reacted to our baby with honour. He even tried to figure out how he could love you. What else do you want from the man?â

Nothing.

Jake lay on the too-hard settee and stared up at his blank ceiling. Running the conversation over and over in his head.

Loveâ¦

Yes, heâd said it, but Tori had known he hadnât meant it and she must be right. Love would be something you learned over months or, more probably, years, a gradual build-up of trust and affection. It surely wasnât what he and Tori had. A one-and-a-half-minute date, followed by one night of passion.

Unbidden, the words of his mother crept back into his subconscious.

âI fell in love with your father on one meeting. One meeting! How ridiculous was that? He carted me off to some strange country, to a life I had no way of dealing with, and look what happened. Love at first sight? Donât make me laugh.â

Nothing made sense. The night was too long, the settee was too hard, the concept of love and of home was too difficult to get his head around.

That Tori could say she loved him, that she could possibly

throw her heart where her head should be, seemed unreal. And if she felt like that, then why wouldnât she marry him?

Should he have insisted he love her? Do the romantic-hero thing?

If he did that heâd be no better than his father.

But he no longer believed in his father as the villain. He no longer knew what he believed in. He was getting into territory that was simply too hard.

And the hardest thingâ¦

The hardest thing was that Tori was right through that door. His woman.

She wasnât his woman. He had no rights.

She felt like his woman.

âSo what are you intending, caveman?â he muttered into the night. âGo and stake your claim? Youâve done enough damage. You have a surgical list longer than your arm waiting for you in the morning. Itâs not fair on your patients if you donât sleep.â

Somehow he managed to switch off, and sleep.

But he couldnât turn off his dreams.

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She woke and she knew heâd gone. The cool-grey apartment practically echoed.

Sheâd thoughtâmaybe sheâd hopedâthat sheâd wake when he left and she could say goodbye, but it had been almost dawn before sheâd drifted into troubled sleep. Her exhausted body had finally demanded what it needed and Jakeâs bedside clock was telling her it was eight oâclock.

She threw back the covers and padded out to the living room, cautiously, just to see, but the sleek leather settee was back being a sleek leather settee. The spare bedding was neatly folded, ready to be stored back in the bedroom closet.

There was a note on the bench.

Catheter trouble again. Travel safe. Iâll be in touch.

A farewell note. How romantic. She crumpled it and slid it into the trash.

The kitchenette was squeaky clean, not even a dirty coffee mug to tell her heâd breakfasted before heâd left. She touched the designer kettle. It was cold. Really cold. He hadnât even had coffee here.

If she lived here she wouldnât have her morning coffee here either, she decided. This place was awful.

Heâd come home tonight to this, she thought, feeling more dismal by the minute as the cool of the apartmentâand the lack of Jakeâsoaked into her. Sheâd have changed the sheets and put hers in the commercial laundry basket sheâd seen near the entrance. Maybe by the time Jake got home the laundry would already have been collected, cleaned and returned.

Nothing would remain of her visit.

There should be something.

Stupid or not, she wanted there to be something.

Her fingers moved instinctively to her throat, to her chain, to something she knew sheâd treasure for ever. She loved her chain. She loved that Jake had given it to her. She should have refusedâbut how strong could a woman be?

Not strong enough.

âI should leave him something,â she said, gazing helplessly around at the designer chic. âI canât leave him with grey.â

And then a thought.

âI did it for me,â she murmured to herself. âHow hard would it be in New York?

âSoho maybe?

âIâd need a cab. Maybe Iâd need two.

âIâd also need time.

âSo what are you waiting for?â she demanded of herself. âJake wanted me to make a home here. Maybe I can do that, only not quite the way he imagined.â

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He knew when her plane took off for heâd checked the QantasÂ® web site. In truth he checked it half a dozen times, and if he hadnât been pushed to his limit with his surgical list maybe heâd have cracked and headed to the airport. âJust to say goodbye,â he told himself and wondered why he had to tell himself that. Surely it was obvious.

But the hands of the clock slipped inexorably around and six oâclock was suddenly right there.

âNot quite ready to knock off yet,â said the surgeon he was working with, and Jake thought, How bad did he have it? How

often had he glanced up at the clock on the operating room wall?

He didnât have it bad. It was onlyâ¦

It was only that it was now one minute past six. The plane would be taxiing to the runway.

Tori was gone.

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She could see the Statue of Liberty from the plane, lit up and beautiful.

She sniffed and the man in the seat next to her smiled in sympathy and handed over a tissue.

âThank you,â she managed and sniffed again and groped in her purse. âItâs very nice of you but I have a handkerchief.â

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It was one in the morning before Jake finally finished. He was wrecked, emotionally and physically, and by the time he reached his apartment his legs didnât want to work any more.

He worked out in the basement gym most mornings. He hadnât this morning. One lost workout and his legs were turning to jelly.

Or maybe it was because of one lost Tori.

âSee, thatâs what you canât think,â he told himself. âThat kind of thinking does no one any good.â

But he rode the elevator and he thought those kinds of thoughts all the way up.

How soon could he go to Australia?

What use was going to Australia? He belonged here. Here was home.

Home. He turned the key in the lock and thought it was no such thing. It was grey.

He was starting to feel ill. Heâd had Tori here and heâd let her go. Leaving him with grey.

He pushed the door wide and it was anything but.

It was decorated by Tori.

It might not be the same stuff sheâd bought in Melbourne but it was as close as made no difference. Back in Australia sheâd transformed a beige relocatable home into a riot of colour and life.

Here it wasâa riot.

Colours, colours and more colours. Cushions, lamps, throws, vases, prints, weird and wonderful statues, a Persian carpet almost completely covering the cool grey tiles, an imitation log fire!

It was too much. It wasâ¦wonderful.

He found himself smiling, moving through the room, fingering things that were tactile as well as lovely. It was warm, inviting and wonderful.

His table had been moved against the wall. It was covered with a rich tapestry, and a vast mirror set behind it so it reflected the warmth of the lamps.

There was an antique desk against the far wall. The books heâd swept onto the floor last night were neatly stacked, ready to be used again.

And thenâ¦

A faint noise had him moving to the bedroom. He opened the door and a small brown cat stalked out, looking suspicious and curious and eager, all at once. A half-grown cat, fawn with a tip of white on its tail.

It was followed by another brown cat, even smaller, but this one had no tip.

Burmese? He wasnât sure of his cats. They looked like Siamese cats, he thought, only different.

The first one sniffed his shoes, then carefully wound its way round and round his ankles.

The second one sat and watched, acting superior.

Catsâ¦

There was a note on his bedâon top of the riot of an amazing patchwork quilt.

I looked for another Celtic love knot but couldnât find one. These are my alternative. Meet Ferdy and Freddy. Theyâre from the pet store on the note stuck on their litter tray. I paid double their asking price on condition that if you really donât want them theyâll take them back. But Iâd recommend keeping them. They keep each other company all day and when you get homeâ¦well, they might just mean you do come home.

He found himself grinning. Ferdy and Freddy. Ferdyâor was it Freddy?âyowled. His brother joined in, then both of them set their tails high and stalked over to the fridge.

What was he supposed to do with cats?

Bemused, he opened the fridge, and found what he was supposed to do with cats. Tori had thought of everything.

âYouâll have to go back,â he told them as he fed them, but he couldnât do it tonight.

When would he find time to take them back tomorrow?

He had work to do before he went to bed. There was a case he needed to look up for the next day.

He sat down at his new desk and opened a textbook.

Ferdy was on his knee in seconds, followed by Freddy.

How was a man supposed to work when he wasâ¦when he was home?

Where was Tori right now? Somewhere around Hawaii?

Not that far.

Too far.

This place was wonderful.

It was missing something.

âI donât think I can,â he told the cats, fondling two ears. Fondling four ears.

âImpossible. My work is here.

âYes, butâ¦

âSheâs just given me two more complications.

âI can handle complications.â

He couldnât, though, he thought, or not immediately. Itâd take some thought.

âLove takes time,â he told the cats. âMonths. Maybe years.â

Years didnât bear thinking of.

He closed his eyes. This was crazy. He was a man who walked alone.

Ferdy dug his claws into his thigh and gently kneaded.

âI donât do pets,â he said through gritted teeth. âI donât doâ¦love?â

He had this all the wrong way round. Heâd go to sleep and heâd wake up in the morning being sensible.

Maybe, or maybe not.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE operation on Harley had been long and perilous. The big schnauzer was only seven years old, but the liver abscess heâd developed was as unexpected as it was lethal and the only option if he was to survive was to remove part of the liver.

At least Tori was no longer working by herself. Her new workplace had specialist canine surgeons. Sheâd been able to call for help, and then work as the assistant of a far more experienced surgeon.

All the same, she was exhausted.

She should be feeling perky and full of energy at five months pregnant, she told herself, but it wasnât happening. Try as she might, she couldnât be perky. Ever since sheâd come back from New Yorkâokay, even before that, ever since Jake left, she concededâthereâd been something exhausting her that wasnât pregnancy. Something was trying to tug her back into the grey fog sheâd been in after the fire.

And she wasnât going to be tugged, she told herself fiercely as she worked. She had great friends, a lovely new job, caring colleagues; sheâd just saved Harley, and Rusty and Itsy were waiting for her back home. Doreen and Glenda cared for the dogs during the day, but the dogs knew who their mistress was and when Tori arrived they almost turned inside out with joy.

Theyâd be expecting her now. Tori glanced at her watch and winced. She still needed to talk to Harleyâs owners, and stop off and buy something for tea, and then collect the dogsâ¦and the tiredness was insidious.

Two more days âtil the weekend, she promised herself, two more days until she could spend the whole time at home. But the weekend brought more problems. Most of the population of the relocatable village spent their weekends up on the ridge, working on their new homes, but for some reason her head still wouldnât let her go there. And there was the other thing. At the weekend

she had time to think of Jake.

The surgeon was closing. âItâs as good as we can get,â he told her. âYou want to go tell Harleyâs mum and dad the good news? â

Of course she did. She pinned on a bright smile and opened the doorâand Jake was in the waiting room.

He was reading a copy of *Horse & Hound*, as though it was totally riveting.

Harleyâs owners, an elderly couple whoâd been frantic about their dog, sprang to their feet. Jake gave her a tiny smile, acknowledging her priorities, and retreated again to his horses. Or hounds.

âHi,â Tori said, as much to him as to Paul and Ida Clemens, and then somehow forced herself back to professional mode. âItâs okay,â she told them quickly. âMore than okay. Itâs good. Weâve taken about twenty percent of the liver but that includes a wide margin of healthy tissue. Weâre sure we have it all. As long as we can keep his cholesterol under control thereâs no reason why he shouldnât live happily into a ripe old age.â

The elderly couple stared at her in silence for a long momentâand then Paul put his hands on his face and sank back into his chair. The elderly farmerâs shoulders shook with silent sobs. His wife sat down and hugged him. Tori produced a box of tissues and Paul grabbed about a dozen.

He needed them all.

They waited then, all of them, for Paul to recover. Tori was achingly aware of Jake watching from the sidelines, but she couldnât hurry this. Paul and Ida had lost their farm in the fires. Theyâd barely survived by holding blankets over their heads as they lay in shallows of their dam. Harley had been under the blankets with them.

If they needed time, sheâd give them all the time in the world.

Finally Paul had himself under controlâor almost. He sat while Ida held his hand, and while Tori gently repeated the good news. Then their questions started. She repeated the initial diagnosis. Hypercholesterolemiaâmassively elevated cholesterolâhad caused the liver abscess. Schnauzers were genetically prone to it, and of course Paul and Ida had treated

Harley as a human before the fires, and afterwards they could refuse his pleading eyes nothing. So Harley had eaten cheese and sausages and chocolate, and finally his liver had started to disintegrate under the strain.

âSo you think you can resist now?â Tori asked them, and Ida managed a strained smile.

âOnce upon a time we were firm parents,â she said. âWe can go back to that. Canât we, Paul?â

âI guessâ¦â

âAnd we move into our new home next week.â Ida was sounding firmer, ready to move on. âWeâll be able to take Harley home to somewhere permanent.â

âNo chocolate?â Paul said.

âNo chocolate,â Ida said and looked speculatively at Paulâs rotund girth. âI have the men in my life back, and Iâm not risking anything again, thank you very much. Can we see him?â

âOf course you can. Our nurse will be taking him through into recovery,â Tori saidâand they thanked her and Tori was left with Jake. He put down *Horse & Hound*.

âHi,â she managed finally, but it didnât come out properly. âUm, why are you here?â

âYouâre supposed to say, âWelcome.ââ

âYouâre very welcome,â she said, and he was. Could he feel it, she wondered. Just how welcome he was?

âI was hoping for five minutes of your time.â

âFive minutes?â

âAll the best dates are five minutes,â he said. âYou can meet the love of your life in five minutes. Or, as it happens, in one and a half minutes if you try hard enough.â

There was enough in that to take her breath away. It did take her breath away. She wanted to sink onto the seat Paul had just vacated and maybe hyperventilate.

Where was a paper bag when she needed one?

âSo Harley really will be okay?â he asked, giving her time to recover, and she thought she could do this; she could talk medicine until she got herself coherent. Maybe.

âIt was a beautiful resection of the liver,â she managed. âTextbook case. Guy Sallerâs our surgeonâheâs the best.â

âSo you didnât do it.â

âI donât have the skills.â

âYou tried antibiotics and closed drainage first?â He was definitely giving her time.

âWe tried everything. I know, resectionâs last-resort stuff, but believe me, this was last resort. If weâd waited any longer we risked rupture. Heâs young and healthy. The liver has every chance of regenerating, and best of all heâs abstained from alcohol so cirrhosis isnât a problem.â

âYou checked for cirrhosis?â he said faintly.

âItâs happened,â she said, recovering enough now to start to smile. âIda and Paul have given him everything elseâwhy not a wee drop of sherry with theirs at night?â

âYouâre kidding me.â

âIâve seen cases of alcoholic poisoning in dogs,â she told him. âThe stupidity of owners sometimes defies belief. Jake, why are you here?â And then as he didnât answer straightaway, she jumped in for him. âIs there a problem at the lodge?â

âThereâs no problem.â

âDo you need to sign papers for sale or something? Rob tells me the farmhouse had been cleaned up and is looking great.â

âThatâs what Iâd like to talk to you about.â

âIt is?â

âIt is,â he said. âSo about that five minutesâ¦â

âYouâve already had it,â she said, but she couldnât get her voice to work properly again. She was sounding breathless.

She was feeling breathless.

âNope,â he said. âThe five-minute date has to start at a designated place. The first date was in a booth in the Combadeen Hall. Our second date has to be somewhere else. I have a rental car outside. Can I take you to my designated date spot?â

âYour designated date spot,â she said, faintly.

âItâs not so far.â

âI need to collect the dogs.â

âI dropped in on Glenda and Doreen,â he said, and at the look on her face he grinned. âI had to do something. I landed five hours agoâI made a beeline for you, only to be told you were in surgery and werenât expected out until now. Unlike Manhattan Central, thereâs a dearth of people to talk to. Even Paul and Ida had taken themselves off to stay with their daughter, and *Horse & Hound* circa 1997 has a limited appeal. So

Iâve heard all about how Glendaâs hand is now behaving beautifully and how well Doreen is. Iâve been slobbered on by one vast golden retrieverâwhat are you feeding her by the way? I thought she was supposed to be a runt. Oh, and Iâve bought Bitsy.â

âYouâve bought Bitsy.â She was suddenly feeling faint.

âI wanted him,â Jake said. âIâve wanted him for months. Like some other things Iâve wanted. Iâve been telling myself I was stupid, but a man can only do that for so long before he starts believing it and starts to act stupid. So Iâve been to see the breeder, and yes, she kept him for herself, but money talks, and I can pick him up as soon as Iâm ready. Thereâre just a couple of things I need to sort first.â He hesitated. âNo. Thereâs only one thing. One really important thing. Five minutes, Tori. Will you come with me and listen?â

âI donât thinkâ¦â

âNo, donât think,â he said. âThinking does your head in. Iâve been thinking and thinking and itâs doing me no good at all. And finallyâ¦you know what? I stopped thinking and Iâm letting my heart decide.â

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They drove in silence, past the lodge, through the burned-out state forest and up onto the ridge.

The year had been kind, with above average rainfall and gentle weather, and the Australian bush had regenerated as only the Australian bush can. Burned trees had new shoots spurting manically out of blackened trunks. Grasses and ferns had pushed up through the ashes. It still looked dreadfully scarred; there were places where the heat had been so intense that itâd take years to come back, but it was no longer grey.

And rebuilding had begun in earnest. Every second house site had been cleared of debris and was now a half-built home. With the kinder weather many families had brought caravans up to the ridge so they could live close to where they were rebuilding.

There were birds back as well, and as they drove there were wallabies feeding on the roadside. As dusk settled Tori could almost imagine the fire had never been.

But it had. Her life would never be the same.

If the fire hadnât happenedâ¦she wouldnât have met Jake. She wouldnât be pregnantâand her hand touched her tummy as it did a hundred times a day.

âThank you for sending me the ultrasound pictures,â Jake said gravely, and she thought he must have seen the movement. Self-consciously she linked her hands onto her knees and stared straight ahead.

She would not think about why he was here, she decided. She would not.

She would not allow herself to hope.

âDid you like them?â she asked. âI carry mine in my purse.â

âI carry mine in my wallet,â he said, and she gasped.

âYouâre joking.â

âMy kid,â he said gravely. âMy wallet.â He smiled. âBy the way, I checked every picture and not one of themâs taken from the right angle. Do we know if we have a daughter or a son?â

We. The tiny word was enough to make her breathless all over again. She had to fight to make herself speak.

âI didnât want to know,â she managed at last. âI like surprises.â

âLike me coming?â

âIâm not sure what to think about you coming.â

âDonât think,â he said again. âJust feel. Itâs the only safe way.â

There was nothing she could say to that, so she sat in silence until they pulled up at their destination. Which was his farmhouseâher former wildlife shelterâonly it was very different from when sheâd left it.

As a child she remembered this place looking beautiful, when the doctor and his wife had loved it. But it had only ever been a weekend retreat for them. Jakeâs father been on call all the time, and heâd lived in Combadeen, so maybe it had been shabby even then.

Now it was anything but shabby. It was a magnificent homestead, its weatherboards gleaming with fresh white paint, its gracious verandah running the full circle of the house, the ancient river-gum timbers of the decking rubbed and oiled back to their original glory.

Someone had worked in the garden. There were so many roses that possums could come and share, she thought, and

thereâd still be enough to go around.

The French windows were cleaned and gleaming. Some of them were open, and there were soft white drapes floating out in the warm evening breeze.

It lookedâ¦like home, she thought, stunned, as Jake helped her out of the car. She didnât need help but she was so dazed she accepted it anyway and she didnât object as he led her into the house and took her from room to room without saying a word.

Why was she here? Why was he here?

It was so beautiful.

It wasnât furnished yet. The rooms were bare. The place was a home waiting for its people. Dogs, she thought suddenly, and kids, and her hand touched her tummy again before she could help herself.

âThereâs something else you need to see before I explain myself,â Jake said softly, and she opened her mouth to argueâor ask, or somethingâbut she couldnât think what to argue or ask or something so she closed it again. He took her hand and led her and she let herself be led.

Out of the house. Back to the car, then along the track, and into the first driveway on the left.

Home. Or home as sheâd once known it. Now it was a mass of regenerating bushland. All that was left was the chimney. The hearth, the fireplace, the heart of the home for her parentsâ lives, for her grandparentsâ lives, stretching far, far backâ¦

Now the scene for grief and destruction.

Only she wasnât feeling grief now, or not so much. It was tempered by this new little life inside her. It was tempered by her dogs, her new job, her new life.

It was tempered by Jakeâs hand.

Once again he was helping her out of the car. He was leading her along the path to where the house had once been, then stopping by the ancient lemon tree that had somehow miraculously survived. Its singed branches had regenerated, and amazingly it was loaded with lemons. The sight actually made her smile.

A massive gum had fallen right in front of it. The team of men whoâd cleared the place had taken away the smaller litter but theyâd chopped the log into three, obviously thinking she might

want to use it. For landscaping or something.

She couldnât think of using anything here.

But Jake had brought along a rug. He spread it across the log so any soot was covered and he propelled her gently downwards.

âSit,â he said, and she sat because she was beyond arguing.

Then, âIâve done all I can without your input,â he told her. âItâs time I brought you onboard.â

âOnboard?â

âOnto my sea of plans,â he said. âI have three directions I can go, and I donât know which one to take.â

âI donât understand.â

âOkay,âhe said gently and he sat down beside her. He took her hand in his and held it, like it was truly precious. âFirst things first. Iâve come home.â

How was a girl to respond to that? She couldnât.

âI was born here,â he said, taking no obvious offence at her silence, but ploughing on regardless. âI suspect I was conceived in the house over there. As you were conceived here. They say thereâs a strong chance you end up marrying the girl next door. How about that?â

Whoa! She should say something, she thought. But what? What?

âBut Iâm getting ahead of myself,â he said, smiling. It was a teasing smile. It was the smile she loved with all her heart.

âIâve quit my job,â he told her. âFor the past two months Iâve been undertaking intensive post-graduate training in pain management. Thereâs more to learn, but instead of being an anaesthetist whoâs good at managing pain, what Iâve decided to do is to become a pain management specialist. I need more training still, but I can learn it on the job, and I can learn it here. I can be useful now. I can be useful here.â

And then, as surprise did give her something to say, he pressured her hand, telling her there was more to come, that for now he simply needed her to listen.

âTori, I was brought up believing my father didnât care,â he told her. âMy mother didnât care eitherânot emotionallyâand that left me with nothing. Or maybe I had emotions, but I learned to lock them away. And then I found you, breaking your heart over a dead koala. And I found the community of

Combadeen. I found people whoâd loved my father and who heâd loved in turn. I discovered that Iâd been raised on a lie.â

He tugged her hand then, just a little so she turned and was facing him.

âNone of that matters,â he said, âexcept in explaining why I was so long in seeing what was before my eyes. When you left I kept going to work, telling myself I was dumb, only youâd left me colour, all through my apartment.â

âI knew youâd like it,â she interrupted, absurdly pleased.

âI love it,â he said simply. âIâve had it all shipped here. And I love Ferdy and Freddy. Theyâre already in quarantine. Iâm hoping Itsy, Bitsy and Rusty take kindly to them. Theyâre very bossy cats.â

She was almost beyond hearing. She was so confused she felt dizzy. He was shipping his lifeâ¦here?

âYouâre coming here?â

âIâm here.â

âYou canât.â

âWhy canât I?â

âYour lifeâs in Manhattan.â

âMy lifeâs with you.â

There was a heart stopper if ever she heard one. Her heart definitely stopped, and it took time before she got it going again. And when she didâ¦

Caution, she thought. Donât get your hopes up. This canât be what it seems.

âJake, we can organise access some other way,â she managed. âI meanâ¦I know you want a say in how our babyâs raised.â

âI want more than that,âhe said, strongly and surely. âI want to see him wake up in the morning and I want to read him bedtime stories. I want to make sure heâs taught baseball and not indoctrinated into that very curious game you call football. I wantââ

âTo change diapers?â

âThat, too,â he said, and he didnât even smile. It seemed he was deadly serious. âI want to share in getting up in the middle of the night. I want to cope with dramas. I want to go to school plays. Did you know my mother never went to a single one of my

school plays? Not a one. Iâm going to the lot.â

âDoes this mean I donât have to?â she asked, trying to joke, but it didnât work. There was too much at stake here for laughter.

âI suspect itâs a team effort,â he said softly, seriously. âThe mother and father need to sit together.â

âJakeâ¦â

âI know itâs too fast,â he said, quickly now, as if he was afraid sheâd stop him before sheâd heard him out. âI know weâve barely had more than our five-minute date. But I want to put a proposition before you.â

He rose, and tugged her to her feet, then led her through the cleared area where once her home had stood. To a spot at the northern end.

âThis was the kitchen, right?â he said, and she nodded.

âSo this viewâ¦itâll have been where you stood and looked out as a family, as you cooked, as you washed dishes, as you lived.â

âYes.â

âThen thereâs a choice to be made,â he said softly. âAs I said at the beginning, thereâre three options.â

âThree.â

âNumber one,â he said, moving right on. âThat you fall into my arms right this minute, and we go next door and we move into what was my fatherâs home and we live happily ever after. Itâs only my preferred option because itâs the quickest,â he said hurriedly. âBut no pressure. I came up before and opened the windows and made it smell great, and I think it looks great, but if you donât wantââ

âJakeâ¦â

âYou need to listen to all three before you decide,â he told her, trying to sound severe. âAnd you need to listen to the plans in full. If we did thatâif lived next doorâthen I think we should build the worldâs best wildlife shelter here, plus a clinic for the work you used to do. Caring for the horses that used to live up here and will live up here again. Families are returning, Tori. Lifeâs starting here again.â

âButââ

âAnd we could call it after the dogs you lost,â he said gently.

âMutsy and Pogo and Banditâs Animal Care. Big letters out the front. Every care in the world inside.â

âOh, Jakeâ¦â

âOr two,â he said hurriedly, and maybe he thought she was about to burst into tears. She might, she thought mistily. She just might. But for now it was more important to listen.

âOkay, moving right onto option two,â he said, and his grip on her hands became more urgent. âOption twoâs if you decide you still want to live here. But even if you did want to live here, youâd agree that I could live here, too. Iâve thought that one through. If you did that, then we could turn next door, my place, into Mutsy and Pogo and Banditâs Animal Care. Itâd take a bit more work, as we have a house there and a blank canvas here, and itâd be a bit of a waste of new curtains, but it could be done. If you want this to stay as your kitchen view, my love, then thatâs your option.â

âYour love?â It was a squeak. It was definitely a squeak.

âDefinitely my love,â he said, and he tugged her tight against him. âAnd then there lies option three. Because much as I love you, much as I admit that my five-minute date was the best thing that could ever have happened to me, much as I want you to be beside me for the rest of my life, if you donât want that, or youâre not ready, or you think you could do better, then Iâll help you rebuild here, and Iâll live next door so I can still teach Hildebrand to play baseballâ¦â

âHildebrand?â

âWe have some discussion to do,â he said lovingly. âLots of discussion.â

âJakeâ¦â

âYes?â

She was trying to get her head around this. Her head wasnât big enough to take it in.

âYouâd live up here? And workâ¦in Melbourne?â

âIn the valley. As Susie says, thereâs work and to spare. Sheâs already set up discussions with health-care providers. I can start work tomorrow if I want. Iâll need to go back and forth to the city for further training but thatâs feasible. You could come with me. And I need to take a few weeks off before I start. I have a half-grown dog to train.â

âJake, stop.â

âItâs too fast,â he said, suddenly rueful. âI promised myself I wouldnât pressure you. Those three optionsâyou can take your time, my love. You can have our baby and we can decide then. I wonât coerce you into falling into my arms because I want to be a father. Because I want to be your husband first. Thatâs what I want most. Everything else can wait.â

And then, because she didnât speak, because she couldnât, he smiled and suddenly lifted her up into his arms and he carried her across the scraped-up earth that was all that was left of her past life, and he took her to where the fireplace still stood, a blackened sentinel in the centre of what once had been her home.

The chimney stood, charred and blackened, the massive mantel that had straddled it still there, burned and twisted but still recognisably a mantel.

And on the blackened timber, a crimson box.

âThis is for later,â Jake said softly, and he set her down. âI came up here on the way to find you, and I left this here and I made a vow. Iâd help you rebuild your life, my love, and if at any stage of the rebuilding you think, Maybe I wouldnât mind a man in my life, then this little box will be here. Itâll sit here waiting so that I wonât have to wait for the right time. Any sliver of opportunity and Iâm in.â

âYouâ¦you just left it here?â

âThere were three wallabies here when I got here,â Jake said. âThey promised theyâd guard it. You want a look?

And what was a girl to say to that?

âItâs not as big as the one at Tiffanyâs,â he said, suddenly anxious. âAnd itâs presumptuous.â

âI only want a peek.â She could almost laugh at the look on his face. Almost but not quite.

So he flipped it open.

It was like the one at Tiffanyâs.

Heâd had it copied exactly. A glistening solitaire diamond in the centre, a heart, then five tiny rubies, with the thinnest ring of diamonds forming the outer edge of the heart. It had all the beauty of the one sheâd seen but none of the ostentation. It was

exquisite.

Her heart seemed to still, settle, warm.â¦

But then, as she put her finger down to touch, he tugged it back and the lid snapped closed with a firm little click. Back it went, onto its resting place of charred timber, a crimson slash against the black.

âItâs too soon,â he said, sounding firm. âFar too soon. Itâs to sit there, Tori, until itâs not too soon. Itâs to stay there until you know your heart, and if it stays there until weâre old and grey, itâs okay, Iâll still be waiting.â

She started up at him, speechless, and she knew he was absolutely serious.

No pressure. She could live here again for as long as she wanted, and heâd be next door, the father to her child, doctor to this community.

The man she loved.

Was it too soon?

And she knew.

Five-minute dating? She didnât need five minutes, she thought mistily, and she put both her hands on Jakeâs shoulders and she pushed him sideways, so hard he staggered. She grinned, for her way was clear now. There were no barriers between herself and the blackened hearth.

âIf you donât mind,â she said softly, wondrously, even finding room for laughter. âYouâre getting in the way of my heartâs desire.â

And she stepped forwards and retrieved the box, and she slid the ring on her finger before Jake could produce any more dumb arguments about too soon and wait and which path would she go.

For she knew her own path. With Jakeâs ring on her finger she turned to her man, and she stepped into the arms of her heartâs desire.

Â

A gleaming new family wagon, bright red, big enough to hold dogs, cats and kids, turned into the gate of the homestead up on the ridgeâOld Docâs Place, according to the localsâand drew to a halt.

Jake climbed out, went round to the passenger side to help his wife out of the car and then together they lifted the baby capsule from the back seat.

Charlotte Elizabeth Hunter gazed up at her parents, wide-eyed and wondering. They smiled down at her, they smiled at each other and together they carried their brand-new baby into her home.

The dogs were waiting to meet them. Itsy and Bitsy and the boss of the pack, Rusty, were quivering with excitement, but the pecking order had been established months ago. Ferdy and Freddy came first, prancing down the steps in stately dignity to investigate this new little member of their family. When the cats conceded their placesâafter cautious approvalâthe dogs wriggled and bounced and shivered their pleasure until Jake ordered control.

âBack,â Jake said and the dogs backed, just like that. They were beautifully trained. Theyâd been trained by Jake, under instruction from Tori. A team effort.

This whole place was a team effort, Jake thought in satisfaction. There were delicious smells coming from the kitchen. Doreen and Glenda had been here this morning, to make sure everything was perfect, then slipping away before they arrived, to give them some privacy.

There was team effort everywhere. Through the regenerating bushland, Jake could just see signs of activity next door. The new Mutsy and Pogo and Banditâs Animal Care Centre was up and running, in the place where Toriâs house had once stood.

âI donât mind moving,â sheâd said, choosing Option One with alacrity. âHome is where the heart is, after all.â

Home.

He knew what it was now, he thought, as he ushered his new wife inside, as he carried his new child into her new home.

Home.

It didnât go with the concept of alone.

Home was dogs, he thought, and cats, and a goldfish called Jake. Home was friends, neighbours, community.

Home was colour and comfort and a fire, and toast on Sunday morning, and great coffee, or no coffee at all because someone had forgotten to buy it. So home might also be hot chocolate, and cleaning up after the dogs and yelling at the cockatoos who

were intent on stripping the paintwork off the verandah.

Home was patients dropping in, and friends.

Home was life.

âSo now we get to live happily every after?â he said to Tori, settling Charlotte Elizabeth on the settee and wondering vaguely what they were going to do with her. Parents coped with newborns all the time, he thought. It couldnât be that hard.

Then there was a knock on the door, and frenzied barking. He and Tori looked at each other and sighed, and Jake opened the door.

A little girl was there, twelve maybe, and behind her was a horse, about three times the size of her. The horse was being held by a guy who looked like a farmer.

âPleaseâ¦â the little girl whispered and looked past Jake to Tori.

âYes?â Tori said. Sheâd scooped Charlotte up and was cradling her. She looked beautiful, Jake thought. His Tori.

âMy horse stood on a nail,â the little girl said. âItâs really deep. Dad saidâ¦Dad said he knew you had a little baby and cats, and the odd wombat with an injured pawâbut if we brought Prince to you, maybe you could just seeâ¦â

âIâm real sorry,â the man called out. âItâs justâ¦having New Docâs Place so close nowâ¦ Itâd save us trailering her down to the city, and itâd be simple, I think. If itâs okay. And the wifeâs sent a sponge cake.â

And to Jakeâs astonishmentâor maybe not, because he should be used to it by nowâTori was smiling. Smiling and smiling.

âItâs fine,â she said, and before Jake knew what she intended, Charlotte was in his arms. âMy husband can take care of our baby,â she told the farmer. âIâll just get my bag.â

So Jake was left, holding his babyâwho was starting to feel wetâand a plate of chocolate sponge cake. He stood on the verandah of their new home, while Tori did her vet thing, while the community went on around them, while his dogs slept at his feet.

And he smiled, too.

Home is where the heart is.

Home is here.

ISBN: 978-1-4268-7533-5

DATING THE MILLIONAIRE DOCTOR

First North American Publication 2010

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